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THE FLAMING HOUR

EDWARD A. McCOURT

The Flaming Hour is a fast-paced and skillfully-told story. The time is that of the second Riel Rebellion, the place is the open range and the foothills of Alberta, roughly Calgary, Lethbridge and south. The people are as fascinating as they are alive, all made for adventure, and a living part of their environment. We believe you will remember some of these people for a long time.



THE FLAMING HOUR



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THE FLAMING HOUR

BY
EDWARD A. McCOURT



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FOR MICHAEL





Chapter I

JOHNNY BRADFORD REINED IN HIS HORSE ON THE CREST OF a high, smoothly rounded knoll and looked about him. Twilight had fallen over the foothills; and the vivid colours of the spring landscape were blended in a soft, blue-grey harmony. But miles to the west the snow-capped mountain peaks were aflame in the light of a sun no longer visible from the level of the prairie; they formed a glittering band that separated the darkening earth from the tranquil evening sky. Johnny leaned forward and patted his horse's neck. "Looks like mighty nice country, Patsy," he said softly. "Seems like our hunch was right. I guess we'll stay awhile."

The little bay mare jerked her head up and down impatiently; she was hungry, and the grass at her feet was green and succulent. "All right, old lady," said Johnny. "Ain't much fun admirin' scenery on an empty stomach. Reckon we'd better find a spot to bed down in." He straightened up and shook Patsy into a brisk trot. For half a mile their way lay across level prairie; then they dipped down the gently sloping side of a wide valley. As they went down, the night darkened quickly around them, although the twilight lingered a little while longer on the great backs of the foothills. By the time they reached the bottom, the first stars were beginning to appear overhead.

Johnny stopped beside a stream that flowed through the valley. The stream ran over rock, and the water was icy cold. He knew that in sunlight it would be a dazzling emerald green. As soon as he had unsaddled Patsy and turned her loose to graze, he gathered some dry brushwood

from along the bank and kindled a little fire. Then he took a small frying-pan and a battered coffee-pot from his saddle-bags and set about cooking a frugal supper of beans and bacon.

After he had eaten and drunk his fill, he sat beside the embers of the dying fire and smoked a cigarette. Then he wrapped himself in the one blanket that he carried and stretched out on the ground with the saddle-bags under his head. He had ridden far that day, and was tired.

Ordinarily he would have fallen asleep almost at once, but tonight there was stirring in him a curious elation that made sleep impossible - an elation that stemmed from a hitherto unrealized feeling of being part of things around him. The feeling had begun to grow almost from the moment he had crossed the border from Montana into the sparsely inhabited stretch of prairie and foothill which in 1884 was known only as a part of the North-West Territories. But because he was not of an introspective nature he did not attempt to explain the sudden sense of belonging; it was enough that for the first time in many years he was able to say to himself, "Here is a good place to stay." So he lay on his back, inexplicable peace in his heart, and watched the myriads of stars that blazed along the Milky Way and listened to the water rushing over its rocky bed.

The moon rose above the swelling mounds of the foothills and by slow degrees the light crept down the sides of the valley. The stars shone with scarcely diminished splendour from the great blue-black vault that arched from rim to rim of the horizon; and somewhere far off among the hills a coyote howled. The cry was taken up by other coyotes and repeated until the night air was filled with the noise of the yapping chorus. Johnny smiled as he watched the moonlight steal down to the valley floor. It was good to be alive, good to be in a country where he felt he wanted to stay. It was time to take roots.

He slept at last, dreamlessly. There was no sound in

the valley except the murmur of the water which, because it went on endlessly, had lost the quality of distinctiveness and no longer made an impression on the ear. Even the coyotes in the hills had fallen silent. So that, when the first shot exploded upon the night air it seemed to shatter the ear-drums and set a thousand echoes reverberating through the quiet valley.

Johnny leapt to his feet, caught up his gun-belt which he had laid close at hand across the cantle of his saddle, and buckled it around his waist. The weight of the gun-barrels against his thighs was reassuring. He listened tensely for a repetition of the sound, but heard nothing except the murmuring of the water and the faint sough of the wind that had begun to stir across the slopes of the hills. His common sense told him that there was no need of alarm; the shot had perhaps been fired by a nester at a coyote skulking about his hen-house, or by an exuberant cowpuncher on his way home from an evening's celebration. But warned by some intangible inner sense, he did not lie down again to sleep. He stood quite still, hands on his guns, for a minute or two longer, then he whistled softly and Patsy came on the trot. He saddled the little mare and stowed his belongings away in the saddle-bags. Then he rode across the stream and up the long, moonlit slope on the other side. The shot had come from somewhere beyond the crest.

A second shot rang out. Its effect was less disturbing than that of the first, because Johnny was subconsciously listening for it. But he was not prepared for the fusillade which followed. Before the echoes had died away he had reached the crest of the hill and was looking down into a second valley which lay stretched out below him, running straight as an arrow between long, gentle slopes.

In the clear moonlight it was possible to see a long way. Half a mile or more up the valley cattle were running, strung out for a distance of several hundred yards. Johnny

clucked softly. "Stampedin'," he said aloud. "I wonder what set 'em off." Then he saw that there were horsemen riding hard behind the cattle—how many he could not tell—shooting as they rode, and knew that this was no stampede. The cattle were being driven at breakneck speed down the valley towards the plain which lay somewhere beyond. Honest cattlemen did not drive their herds by night, to the accompaniment of gun-fire.

Johnny swung Patsy in a half-circle and shook her into a gallop. For perhaps ten minutes he rode along the crest of the valley slope, far above the herd, but abreast of the riders. The firing had ceased, except for an occasional shot from far up the valley. For the time being at least, the rustlers had shaken their pursuers, although they did not for an instant slacken the pace of the drive. Johnny now counted at least five horsemen riding hard on the heels of the cattle. He had no way of telling if they had spotted him, but he did not think so, since he was high enough above them to be out of their normal line of vision.

The sides of the valley grew steadily lower, until at last they merged with the high, undulating plain that ran straight south for miles between foothill and mountain. The pace of the drive had at last begun to slow, since the cattle were badly blown and no longer panic-stricken. They were closely bunched now, the rustlers crowding hard and urging them on with shrill yells. The border was still nearly ten miles away, and the night was passing.

As soon as Johnny reached prairie level he touched Patsy's sides with the blunted rowels of his spurs, and the game little pony responded with a burst of speed that carried her alongside the herd leaders. This was familiar work, and she did what was expected of her with eager assurance. Johnny knew that there was no longer any purpose to be served by keeping quiet, since he must inevitably have been spotted by now, and a wild yell burst

from his throat as he drove Patsy close to the flanks of the lead steers.

Many a time, while riding night herd on the great cattle trails from Texas north, had Johnny risked his life as a routine part of his job, in order to break up a stampede formation. With such experience behind him he would have found the job he now attempted an easy one, had he been able to attend to it uninterrupted. As it was, he had turned the herd in a sweeping semicircle by the time the first bullets flew past his head.

At first he made no attempt to fire back. Effective shooting with a six-gun from the back of a galloping horse was impossible, and besides, he had no wish to become involved in a shooting affray, regardless of the justice of his participation. But presently he saw that two of the rustlers had come up on the far side of the herd and were now riding directly across from him, pressing hard against the lead steers in an attempt to swing the herd back into a straight line. In the hope of forcing the riders to fall back, Johnny fired half-a-dozen shots across the backs of the cattle. To his astonishment one of the horsemen, a squat, crouching figure, clutched suddenly at the horn of his saddle and swayed as if about to fall. Johnny's lips set in a straight line. Discretion warned him that now was the time to turn and ride for his life, but he gave the warning scant heed—even when a bullet nicked the rim of his hat and almost lifted it off his head. He crouched low in the saddle, fired back at the rider who had come up behind him unobserved, and once again crowded Patsy close into the flanks of the herd leaders.

There was a sudden outburst of firing from somewhere far to the rear, and Johnny gave a whoop of exultation. Help was coming! With renewed hope, he urged Patsy forward, and the cattle yielded steadily to the pressure on their flank. They were easy beasts to handle—almost as big as the Texas longhorns, but tame, fat, slow-moving by

comparison. The two riders who had come up on the opposite side had now fallen back, one of them obviously hit, and unwittingly formed a kind of hub around which Johnny turned the herd in the form of a great mill-wheel.

As soon as the lead steers had closed with the stragglers bringing up the rear of the herd, thus completing the circle, Johnny swung Patsy clear and rode furiously across the prairie towards a deep coulee which he had skirted while turning the herd. The cattle, he knew, would mill for hours; now was the time to run for safety. But when he looked back over his shoulder he was dismayed to see that the mill-wheel was being fast broken up. The rustlers were riding like men possessed; already twenty or thirty head of cattle had been separated from the main herd, and others were beginning to follow. With little thought of the consequences, Johnny spun Patsy on a dime and raced along the edge of the coulee to intercept the cattle that had broken away. He had no longer any clearly-formed plan of action in mind; all he could do now was play for time, until the help which must be close at hand arrived.

One of the rustlers, riding a big black stallion, cut across to intercept him. Johnny fired twice, then the hammer of his gun fell on empty cylinders. For an instant he saw the rustler at close range in the moonlight. He wore a black mask that covered most of his face, and his hat was pulled low over his forehead. There was a gun in his hand, but he did not use it. Instead, he sent the stallion crashing into Patsy's shoulder.

The little pony went down as if hit by a pile-driver. At the moment of collision Johnny kicked his feet clear of the stirrups. As Patsy went down he shot forward out of the saddle, and had a confused, bewildering impression of flying endlessly through space. Of a sudden the stars that were blazing all around him multiplied a thousandfold then went out all together in the impalpable blackness that enveloped the universe.

Chapter II

SOMEONE WAS BEATING WITH THOR-LIKE STROKES ON AN anvil, and the sound quivered through Johnny Bradford's brain and set up sympathetic vibrations that compelled him to clench his teeth in order to keep from crying out. Now the blows were raining not on the anvil at all, but directly on Johnny's skull. He sat up abruptly, yelped in anguish, and lay down again. When the pain in his head had become endurable, he once more raised himself, gingerly this time, to a sitting position. He remained for a long time with his head bowed between his knees. The blows seemed to fall easier that way.

When at length he lifted his head and looked about him, he found that he was in a small, square room, walled with rough pine boards. Bright sunlight streamed through a single narrow window high above his head. There was no furniture of any kind in the room, except the cot-bed on which he was sitting. Why he had been brought here at all was beyond his muddled comprehension. The last thing he could remember was pitching over Patsy's head into the coulée. Obviously he had been knocked cold on landing, but why should the rustlers have carried him off and locked him up? Because they were afraid he had recognized some of them? Perhaps, but any rustlers whom Johnny had known in the past would have silenced a possible informer in more expeditious and permanent fashion. Still pondering the problem, he lurched to his feet and tried the door. It was securely barred on the outside. For a minute he debated the advisability of standing on the cot and trying to look out of the window, but he was still

weak and dizzy, and thinking about things had made his headache worse. It was easier and no doubt just as profitable to lie back on the cot and await developments.

He dozed off, and the hammering began again. He sat up, swung his legs over the side of the cot, and held his head between his hands, but the pounding continued. Curiously, this time the blows were painless. He lifted his head and looked at the door. It was vibrating violently. Johnny stood up uncertainly. "Hello," he called. "Come right in."

The door opened, and a girl stood outside in the sunlight. She carried a Winchester rifle in a way that suggested she knew how to use it. "Good-morning," she said brusquely. "How do you feel now?"

She was slim and fair and good to look at. Her eyes were a clear blue, and there was a dusting of tiny freckles on either side of her nose.

"Pretty well, ma'am," said Johnny non-committally. "But not havin' had a chance to shave and tidy up, I guess I don't look it."

The blue eyes appraised him critically. "You are rather a sight. I'll bring you some water presently, so you can wash up. But I'll have to lock the door again." There was the faintest suggestion of a burr in her voice. The sound was pleasant in Johnny's ears.

"Wait a minute--no need to do that." Johnny stepped across the threshold into the warm sunlight.

The blue eyes narrowed suddenly, and the Winchester pointed unwaveringly at the pit of Johnny's stomach. "Stay where you are! One step more and I'll shoot!"

There was something in her voice that told Johnny she wouldn't. All the same, the chance wasn't worth taking. Guns sometimes went off by accident. "All right," he said amiably enough. "But would you mind tellin' me why you want to keep me locked up?"

Her face hardened. "Don't be ridiculous. You know perfectly well."

"Honest Injun, I really *am* stumped. You don't look like the kind of gal who'd be stringin' along with cattle-thieves--"

For a horrified moment he thought she really was going to shoot. "Why, how dare you!" she gasped. "Get back inside at once!"

Johnny grinned pacifically. "All right, ma'am, you're not a cattle-thief. But if you're not --"

"And don't call me ma'am."

"What's your name then?"

"Linda Fraser."

"Mine's Bradford. Johnny Bradford. Now, look here, Linda --"

"And *don't* call me Linda."

"You sure limit my range," said Johnny, rubbing his unshaven chin. "Of course, I could call you *Miss* Fraser, but down where I come from we used to reserve that handle for old maids and folks who were hard to get to know. Now, you're not an old maid --"

"But as far as you're concerned, Mr. Bradford, I'm going to be *awfully* hard to get to know."

Johnny shrugged. "I never contradict the party that's got me covered, Miss Fraser. But let's backtrack for a minute. What I was sayin' was that if you're not stringin' along with cattle-thieves, how come you've got me locked up? And why the pop-gun when you're carryin' on a friendly conversation?"

A look of something like perplexity crept into Linda Fraser's eyes, flickered a moment and then disappeared. "Listen, Mr. Bradford, if that's what you like to call yourself, maybe the crack you got on the head has knocked you silly, or maybe you're that way all the time. Last night Dad and Slim Webber and the Hitchcock boys and some men from the Circle K caught you, red-handed, trying

to drive off about three hundred head of cattle. Remember now?"

"I remember." Johnny nodded slowly. "Looks like you got me dead to rights, doesn't it?" He flipped a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket and rolled a cigarette with lean, expert fingers. "All the same, I'd like to talk to your dad."

"Dad's gone to Macleod to get the police."

"The Mounties?"

"Yes, the Mounties. Ever hear of them?"

"Sure," said Johnny casually. "They got quite a reputation over the line. The Queen's War Dogs, they call 'em. Pretty unhealthy country up here for rustlers and such-like vermin, I'd say." He lit his cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke. "Dad leave you here alone?"

"Certainly not. The boys are around."

"Boys?"

"Yes. Jess McNulty and Slim Webber."

"Sure, sure, I forgot today was Sunday. They're hangin' around the corrals, I figger, with nothin' to do except wait for their grub."

"They—they've got chores to do," said the girl vaguely. "They're all over the place. And besides—" She tapped the stock of the Winchester lightly with her fingertips.

"I know. I bet you're a good shot, too." His hand stabbed out with the speed and precision of a striking snake and caught Linda Fraser's wrist in a vice-like grip. Simultaneously his other hand struck down the barrel of the Winchester.

With a cry of pain the girl fell to her knees. Johnny released his grip. "I'm real sorry, Linda," he said. "I didn't mean to hurt you. But I couldn't take any chances."

"You brute— you beast!" she said furiously. "You get back inside that shed at once or I—I'll—"

Johnny stooped and picked up the Winchester. "Guess

Jess and Slim are asleep," he said. "I'd fire 'em if I were you."

The girl bit her lip, but said nothing. Johnny stepped away from the shed door and looked about him. In the corral beyond the barn a small bay pony was standing with its head over the top rail. "Come on, Linda," he said. "Let's you and me take a little walk."

She obeyed with surprising meekness, and together they went down to the big log barn. Johnny found his saddle hanging from a peg just inside the door, his guns and saddle-bags slung across the horn. The shells had been removed from the gun-belt. "You folks sure leave things lyin' around mighty convenient, Linda," he grinned, buckling on his guns. "Mighty kind of you to let me take my artillery along, even though you didn't leave me anythin' to shoot out of it."

Linda looked away, her face rigid with disdain. Johnny regarded her thoughtfully for a moment, then slung the saddle over his shoulders and walked down to the corral. Patsy welcomed him with an eager whinny and thrust her muzzle through the bars to be rubbed. Johnny saddled her in leisurely fashion, then led her to the trough beside the windmill where he let her drink her fill. He himself had a long drink right from the spout, then doused his head in the trough. He still felt a little weak in the legs, but the headache had almost disappeared.

"Look here, Linda," he said, shaking the water out of his curly black hair, "I'm not really a thief."

Linda sniffed. She had completely recovered her poise. "No? I suppose you were taking the cattle out for a little exercise—a brisk frolic in the moonlight?"

Johnny considered a spot between Patsy's eyes. "Your dad lose many cattle?"

"He didn't lose any of them," said Linda triumphantly. "They were milling when he and the boys caught up with them."



"That's funny, now."

"What's funny?"

"Cattle ain't in the habit of millin' unless somebody turns 'em. In fact, they *never* mill unless somebody turns 'em."

"What do you mean?" Again there was flickering uncertainty in Linda's eyes.

"Nothin'—nothin' at all." Johnny was working the lever of the Winchester to eject the shells. Unexpectedly he threw back his head and laughed loud and long.

"I seem to be asking a lot of questions," said Linda impatiently, "but would you mind telling me what the joke is?"

Johnny handed her the Winchester. "The next time you cover a desperado you'd better see that your gun's loaded," he said.

Still chuckling, he swung himself into the saddle. Then suddenly his mood changed. "Honest, Linda," he said soberly, "I wasn't runnin' the cattle last night. I just happened along, that's all. You believe me?"

"No, I don't."

Johnny was not sufficiently acute to detect in the very vehemence of the girl's denial an admission of doubt. He took her words at their face value. "I was afraid you'd feel that way," he said. "I guess I'd better be goin'."

He leant down from the saddle, swept a long arm around Linda's slim waist, lifted her off her feet and kissed her full on the lips. Then he set her down again. "Somethin' to remind us of each other," he said. "Good-bye, Linda."

He rode off at a brisk trot. Presently, at the top of a low ridge, he drew rein and looked back. The girl was standing by the corral just as he had left her, the Winchester lying at her feet. He took off his hat and waved it. But she gave no sign that she had seen.

"I guess she's real mad at me," said Johnny regretfully. "Too bad. She's a nice girl— a mighty nice girl."

He rode down the ridge and on into the hills. As he rode he sang, in a voice barely above a whisper, a song that he had learned years before on the Abilene Trail:

"I struck the trail in '79,
The herd strung out behind me;
As I jogged along my mind ran back
To the gal I left behind me.
That sweet little gal, that true little gal,
The gal I left behind me."

Chapter III

JOHNNY RODE STEADILY SOUTH FOR NEARLY AN HOUR, pushing Patsy to the limit of her speed. Now that his head was clear, he felt physically well, but his mood was one of bitter exasperation. "Doggone it all," he muttered to himself, "just when I find a country where I figger I'd like to hang my hat and stay a while, I got to move out and move out fast. Wouldn't mind if it was my own fault. But when it comes of tryin' to be a good neighbour to someone I haven't even met—that's tough!"

He had no well-defined plan in mind. He was in a strange and now hostile country; soon a patrol of red-coats would be on his trail, and from what he had heard of the efficiency of the North-West Mounted Police he knew that the sooner he fled from the territories of Her Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria the better. But there was a stubborn streak in Johnny Bradford's make-up; and now it was allied with a strong sense of injured virtue. "No, sir," he said aloud, drawing rein to give Patsy a short breathing spell, "no, sir, they're not goin' to run me out! I'm stickin'. Just take a look, Patsy. How'd you like to spend your old age chewin' grass on *this* range?"

The grass that covered the slopes was a vivid post-card green, against which the rankly blooming prairie flowers formed a brilliant, multi-coloured design. There were few trees in the open, but they grew thickly in the numerous canyons that were carved deep in the rocky substrata underlying the thin layer of topsoil. Through every canyon ran a stream of water, emerald green and ice-cold. It was a country good to look upon, and Johnny

felt again, only with redoubled force, that strange stirring within him that he had first experienced shortly after crossing the border. "No, sir," he repeated, inhaling the clean, crisp air to the depth of his lungs, "no, sir, they're not goin' to run me out. I'm here for keeps!"

He spoke with an emphasis designed to give strength to his determination. For his position was indeed a precarious one. He had crossed the international boundary from Montana only the night before; no one had seen him come, no one in the vast North-West Territories knew him. And he had been found unconscious near a herd of cattle that had been stolen. Had ranchmen across the line found him under similar circumstances, he would have been swinging from a branch long ere this. There was something to be thankful for, anyway. But there seemed to be no way of clearing himself with the local cattlemen, or, which was of more immediate concern, with the North-West Mounted Police.

Johnny rolled a cigarette and smoked thoughtfully. The logical plan seemed to be to turn around and ride north for a day or two and try to find work on a ranch a long way from the border. The police would naturally expect him to have bolted for Montana immediately upon escape; indeed, it was possible that they might not pursue him, assuming that he was already beyond their reach. On the other hand, if he rode north he would be placing many miles between himself and the sanctuary which lay across the border. In the end, somewhat against his better judgment, he decided to continue riding south. Somewhere near the border and close to the mountains he would try to find a job. On one thing he was determined—he would stay in the country until the police hunted him down. Then, if necessary, he would shoot and run.

Johnny rode south. Soon he found himself among hills that were higher and more rugged than any through which he had hitherto passed. He could not be sure, but he

guessed that he was in the Porcupine Hills region, a miniature upheaval of earth and stone lying almost in the shadow of the Rockies. His cattleman's eye told him that this was excellent grazing country, with abundance of grass, water and shelter, but there was no evidence of any large herds in the region.

Presently he came to the rim of a canyon deeper and wider than any that he had hitherto crossed. A well-worn trail led down through the pines to the canyon floor far below. It might once have been a buffalo trail, but now there were horses' hoofprints clearly defined in the dust. The tracks were fresh. Johnny hesitated. Perhaps a herd of range horses grazed in the canyon, or perhaps the trail led across to a ranch house on the other side. It struck him that here in the shelter of the hills he might find work which would enable him to live for a time at least in comparative security.

He turned Patsy into the path and began the descent. The trail wound in and out among the pines, and the aromatic smell of the evergreens was pleasant in Johnny's nostrils. But to his intense disappointment he found that the path, instead of crossing the wide floor of the canyon and winding up the opposite side, appeared to follow the canyon west for an indeterminate distance. For a time he considered the possibility of trying to ride up the opposite wall, but the rocky surface offered such insecure footing that not even a pony as sure-footed as Patsy would have been able to make the ascent without risk of a broken leg or worse. Either he could go back and make a long detour to the east, running a risk of encountering a police patrol on the way, or he could follow the trail along the canyon in the hope that it would presently swing up to the top of the south wall.

While he was pondering the alternatives, his eye caught a flash of moving colour a few hundred yards up the canyon. Quickly he slipped from the saddle and crept forward to

the edge of the pines. The canyon ran straight between its walls for nearly a quarter of a mile, then curved behind a great shoulder of rock. Around the curve, horsemen were riding in single file. Johnny's breath hissed suddenly between his teeth. "Redskins!" he ejaculated.

He hurried back to Patsy and re-mounted. By the time he reached the open again, the last of the file of horsemen had disappeared around the bend. The purpose of the path was now clear; it led to an Indian encampment somewhere up the canyon. After the first shock of recognition, Johnny felt intense relief. The Canadian Blackfeet were, he knew, friendly; he would be able to obtain food at the encampment, and information about the ranching country to the south. Perhaps, too, the Indians could show him a way up the south wall, making a detour to the east unnecessary.

The inevitable stream of emerald-green water ran through the canyon, crystal clear over a rocky bed. Pines grew thickly along its banks. At one point the trees spread out to form a little grove. When Johnny came abreast of the grove he saw that it sheltered a building of some kind. His curiosity aroused, he turned off the trail, splashed through the stream and into the grove. The building stood in a clearing in the centre. It was surprisingly large, built of heavy logs, with a gabled roof. There were hitching-posts along either side; and directly in front of the door, suspended from a cross-bar between two uprights, hung a heavy cast-iron bell.

Johnny scrutinized the building in some perplexity. Maybe a school for the Indians, he thought, or possibly a trading-post, although it didn't look like one. No trading-post he had ever seen had been equipped with a bell. Acting on sudden impulse, he dismounted and pushed open the door of the building. It was cool and dark inside. Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the darkness and he was able to make out details of the austere interior—

the unpainted benches, the strip of worn matting down the centre of the floor, the pulpit made from plain, unvarnished pine.

"Good-morning."

Johnny started. A man had come out of a curtained recess behind the pulpit and stood looking down at the intruder. Johnny grinned uncertainly. "Sorry to come buttin' in," he said. "I was just ridin' past and thought I'd like to see what sort of plant you got here. I didn't know there was anyone inside."

The man came down from the little platform and approached Johnny. He was splendidly built, with powerful shoulders, and a shock of jet-black hair turning grey at the temples. "I'm glad you stopped," he said. "Service is over and I'm alone now."

"I nearly forgot--this is Sunday. You preach to the Indians?"

"Yes. You're on the Piegan reservation, you know. The Piegans are a bit wild, like all the tribes of the Blackfeet, but they're worth saving."

"Most wild things are," said Johnny.

The minister held out his hand. "I like to hear you say that," he said, a smile of unexpected warmth playing over his thin, sunburnt face. "My name is Steven Conway. Perhaps you'll ride back to the manse with me and have something to eat. It's dinner-time."

Johnny took the outstretched hand. "I'd like to do that," he said slowly, "only--"

He hesitated, did not go on. Steven Conway regarded him for a moment in silence. Then he spoke. "You're in trouble. Perhaps you'd like to tell me?"

There was another silence, longer this time. Then Johnny was surprised to hear his own voice. "Yeah, I'm in trouble. And I'd like to tell you."

Chapter IV

THE "MANSE" WAS A LITTLE LOG CABIN STANDING ON A wide shelf half-way up the south canyon wall, almost hidden from sight by the pine trees and shrubbery that grew thickly on three sides. It was reached by a precipitous path that wound up past lichen-covered boulders and through a dense growth of scrub pine. A stream of water trickled down from the rocks above the cabin. Steven Conway had built a dam of logs and stone, diverting the stream so that it flowed through an artificial channel in front of the cabin door. A few early spring flowers bloomed bravely along the edge of the stream, and delicate green shoots were showing above the thin layer of black earth in the little vegetable garden. "Everything freezes two or three times a year," Conway explained with a wry smile, "but sometimes I'm lucky enough to save a few green onions and a nibble of lettuce."

The cabin was roomy inside, and comfortably furnished. A stone fire-place extended across the greater part of one end; in front of it stood two arm-chairs, home-made of rough pine boards and draped with gaily-coloured Hudson's Bay blankets. Shelves littered with books, magazines and odd knick-knacks ran around the walls, and two immense bearskin rugs covered most of the floor. There were even curtains at the two big windows, dark in colour and severe in design, but they added a touch of domesticity not often found in bachelor quarters on the frontier.

The minister and his guest ate their meal in the small, spotlessly clean kitchen that adjoined the living-room. The inevitable beans and bacon constituted the main

course, but there was, in addition, fresh white bread and a delicious apple pie. "The good housewives for miles around take pity on my unwedded state," Steven Conway explained, "so I enjoy most of the privileges of matrimony and none of the disadvantages."

For the most part the meal was eaten in silence, not because the men were disinclined to talk but because frontier convention, deeply ingrained in both, did not encourage conversation as an accompaniment to the really serious business of eating. But afterwards, when they sat together on the wide porch that ran all the way along the front of the cabin, their tongues were loosened. Conway waved his hand towards the scene below, where the canyon walls bulged out to form a natural amphitheatre. "The Indians held their Sundances down there in the old days," he said. "That's how Sundance Canyon gets its name. The whisky traders built a little post over on the other side. You can see what's left of the stockade."

"Don't the Piegans hold the Sundance any more?"

"Not since the Mounties came."

Johnny looked vaguely perplexed. "I've seen one or two Sundances among the Blackfeet in Montana. Sort of tough on the young bucks, I figger, but it seemed to mean a lot to them. Wonder if it's a good idea to stop the dances."

"Why not? We've taken everything else from them." There was a rasping note in Conway's voice. Then he lapsed into silence and sat for a long time staring out over the canyon. In repose there was a compelling quality about his face that Johnny could not analyze--some suggestion of hidden power lurking in the deep-set eyes or in the lines of the thin, expressive mouth. At length Conway turned in his chair.

"All right," he said, "tell me about it."

Johnny told him, from the beginning. Told him of his childhood on the little New England farm, of the death of his parents, of his unhappy boyhood years with an uncle

in the village, of his running away at the age of fifteen, and of the long, difficult journey south-west to Texas. He told Conway something of the years he had spent on a ranch in the Pecos, of trips north with the great herds of long-horns over the Chisholm and Abilene Trails - first to Ellsworth and Abilene, later to Dodge City. "Last fall," he said, "I came up the trail from Pecos clear to Montana - two thousand miles as the crow flies - with a herd that the Government sent to the Blackfeet reservation. Bein' so close to the border, I kind of got a hankerin' to see what the country was like on this side. I've always been a sucker for new places. So I didn't go back. I got a job punchin' cows for the winter down in the Judith Basin. Come spring and I headed over the line like I figgered. And right away I walked into trouble. That's funny, too, because I always kept clear of it down in a country where the opportunities are a lot more frequent than they're supposed to be around here. Hadn't been in the Territories twenty-four hours before I'm mixed up in cattle-rustlin' and have the Mounties on my tail." He grinned ruefully. "Anyway, I haven't found time hangin' heavy on my hands since I got here."

"What happened?"

Johnny described briefly the events of the preceding night. "And," he concluded, "I guess I wouldn't be here right now if that fool gal hadn't opened the door and then covered me with a gun that wasn't loaded."

Conway smiled. "Linda Fraser is very pretty."

"You bet she is," said Johnny with enthusiasm.

"And bright, too."

"Well, I dunno about that. I mean--"

"Linda is *very* bright," said Conway with emphasis.

Johnny sat up. "Say, you're not suggestin' that she *knew* the gun wasn't loaded?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. After you get to know her better you can draw your own conclusions."

"Yeah," said Johnny doubtfully, "but how am I goin' to get to know her better? Think she'll come to Macleod to visit me in the lock-up?"

With an air of decision Conway got to his feet. "Come on, Johnny, we're riding. Linda probably guessed the truth--that you're innocent. We'll pay Superintendent Cotton in Macleod a visit. He'll give you a clean sheet. Then you can drop in on Linda and thank her."

But Johnny was instinctively on his guard. "Hey, wait a minute, Mr. Conway. How do I know that the Superintendent will believe I wasn't mixed up in the rustlin'? From what I've heard, these Mounties are mighty hard to convince."

"He'll believe what I tell him."

Johnny blinked at the note of authority in Conway's voice. "Well, mebbe," he said uncertainly. "But how do I know what you'll tell him?"

Conway's face softened unexpectedly. "Johnny, your parents came from Ireland, didn't they?"

"They did-- but what's that got to do with it?"

"From Antrim?"

"My dad came from a place called Corrymeela."

Conway laughed delightedly. "In the seventh of the Nine Glens--that's the one with the most magic in it and not five miles from my own home! Man, I can catch the tilt of it even when it's obscured by a generation of time and corrupted by contact with a dozen mongrel tongues! Johnny, did you ever hear of one Antrim man betraying another even if he *knew* he was guilty?"

"I didn't know you were an Irishman, Mr. Conway," said Johnny gravely. "I'll ride with you any time you say. But if you don't mind, I'd like to shave first."

There was hot water in the kettle, and Johnny had soap and a razor in his saddle-bags. A great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, and as he shaved in front of the

little mirror that hung over the wash-basin he sang, in his full, rich baritone, about a girl named Betsy:

"Did you ever hear tell of sweet Betsy from Pike,
Who crossed the wide prairies with her lover Ike,
With two yoke of oxen and one spotted hog,
A tall Shanghai rooster and an old yaller dog?"

He finished shaving, put away his razor and tried to stem the flow of blood from a nick in his chin. "This'll teach me to keep my jaw quiet when I'm slidin' a razor over it," he said to himself as he dabbed at the cut with a damp towel. Then he heard the sound of voices outside. Instantly on the alert, he slipped to the window and looked out.

A girl had come on foot up the steep pathway and was talking to Steven Conway. She was probably not more than fifteen, but tall and well developed for her age. Her black hair hung in two thick braids down her back. "Indian," said Johnny, then instantly amended his statement. For the girl had turned her face towards him, and he saw that her skin was much too fair for that of a full-blooded Indian. The face was striking—oval in shape, with features of an almost classical symmetry. Something about the face seemed for a moment familiar, but the impression vanished. Johnny watched the girl, fascinated. She was talking animatedly, illustrating her words with swift, graceful gestures. Johnny was able to catch the inflections of her voice, but she spoke in an Indian dialect wholly unfamiliar to him. But Conway evidently understood. From time to time he nodded his head, or interjected a remark. When the girl had finished speaking, he replied at some length. He seemed to be giving the girl instructions of some sort. She listened attentively, and as soon as he had finished speaking, turned and slipped away down the path, sure-footed as a mountain goat. Just at

the point where the path lost itself among the pines she turned, and with a flash of gleaming white teeth, blew Conway a kiss.

"Well," said Johnny, as he watched the girl vanish from sight, "she never learned *that* from the red-skins, anyway!"

He put away his shaving-kit and went outside. Conway was bringing up the horses from the little log stable behind the cabin. "I've just had a visit from one of my parishioners," he said.

"I saw her through the window," said Johnny. "Nice lookin' little girl. A breed?"

"Yes, a half-breed." Conway's face darkened. "Her mother died in child-birth. No one seems to know who the father was. Some trader, perhaps, or even a missionary. She was brought up by her mother's people. Her name is Running Stream."

"Suits her, somehow," said Johnny.

"The Indians are poets. That's one reason why we don't understand them."

They mounted and rode down into the Sundance Canyon, Conway in the lead. Then they rode abreast along the trail, past the Mission House and so on up through the pines to the top of the canyon wall. "We've got twenty miles to go," said Conway. "I hope your horse is in good shape."

"Patsy will take me wherever I want to go," said Johnny confidently. "We goin' straight to Macleod?"

"Yes. The sooner you get yourself straightened out with the law the better. And, if I were you, I'd keep my guns out of sight."

Looking rather sheepish, Johnny unbuckled his gun-belt and stowed his six-guns away in his saddle-bags. "Guess you're right," he agreed. "Just never occurred to me. Across the line I'd sooner have gone without my pants than my guns."

"I know. But in the Canadian West the church and the law arrived before the settlers. And the police don't like men who go armed."

Johnny's eye rested momentarily on the bulge beneath Conway's shirt, close to his armpit. But he said nothing. He had no wish to anger the man who had offered to be his advocate. And besides, preachers, like police officers, were men of special privileges. Perhaps the right to carry a concealed weapon was one of them.

Chapter V

ALL AFTERNOON THEY RODE STEADILY ALONG A DIM PRAIRIE trail, straight east at first, but gradually swinging to the north. The country through which they passed was sparsely settled; occasionally they saw a group of ranch buildings in the distance, and once or twice they exchanged greetings with horsemen riding in the opposite direction. Conway was for the most part silent and preoccupied, and Johnny, in a mood of sudden nostalgia, sang softly to himself the innumerable stanzas of *The Old Chisholm Trail*:

"Come along, boys, and listen to my tale,
I'll tell you of my troubles on the Old Chisholm Trail.

"Oh, a ten-dollar hoss and a forty-dollar saddle,
And I'm goin' to punchin' Texas cattle.

"I woke up one mornin' on the Old Chisholm Trail,
Rope in my hand and a cow by the tail.

"Foot in the stirrup and hand on the horn,
Best danged cowboy that ever was born "

and so on to the very end of the ballad which in length at least was worthy of the trail it celebrated.

Towards evening Conway drew rein. "I don't know how you feel, Johnny," he said, "but I'm mighty hungry."

"Both of us," Johnny agreed. "But all I've got in my bags is a bit of bacon that must be gettin' pretty high by now. You packin' anythin' we can get our teeth into?"

"No, but there's a ranch just over the crest of that big hill lying to the south. Suppose we drop in for a bite to eat?"

It will only take us half a mile or so out of our way, and since we've still got ten miles to go, that doesn't mean much."

"Whatever you say," said Johnny. "So long as they don't lock me up in the woodshed."

Conway laughed. "The Major would probably fill you full of buckshot if he thought you were mixed up in last night's raid," he said. "But he'll take my word for it that you're an honest man."

"Major?" said Johnny. "A real, honest-to-goodness major, or is he somethin' like a Kentucky colonel?"

"Oh, Major Scudamore is the real thing. The West is full of Old Country men of his class, some of them black sheep of good family---remittance men, we call them---some of them retired officers. We even have a peer or two in the district. You must have run across a few samples of the type in the States. Major Scudamore served twenty years in India, until the climate got him. He should have retired to a cozy family hotel in Eastbourne or Plymouth, but instead he came traipsing away out here with his wife and two daughters. You'll find the family interesting."

They topped the crest of the hill and saw the mountains stretching away far to the south-west in a long, serrated line of snow-capped peaks. Immediately below them, at the edge of a deep draw, stood a group of frame buildings in various stages of dilapidation. The house was little more than a shack; the clap-boards on the sides were black with weathering, and the tar-paper which presumably had at one time covered the roof now flapped in long strips about the eaves. The barns and outbuildings were, if possible, in worse condition than the house; part of the roof of the barn had caved in, no doubt under the weight of the past winter's snow, and had not yet been repaired. "Doesn't look like the Major's makin' a fortune," commented Johnny, surveying the dismal cluster of ruins with a jaundiced eye.

"But at least he showed good sense in choosing a site for his house. Think of drinking your after-dinner coffee with a view like that in front of you."

Johnny looked at the sweep of country that stretched out below them for miles against the stupendous back-drop of the mountains. "I guess it makes up for a lot of things," he said.

They rode down the hill and on through a gate that hung by a single rusty hinge. In the yard all was disorder and neglect. Someone had tried to make a flower-garden in front of the house, but had long since given up the fight and abandoned the field to the weeds and couch-grass that even this early in the season grew everywhere in rank profusion. But the wilderness had not triumphed completely; a flagpole towered high above the house—somewhat on an angle, it is true—and from the top a tattered Union Jack floated high in the clear air, bearing witness to some strange integrity of spirit which material corruption could not quite destroy.

As Johnny and Conway drew up in front of the door, the sound of animated conversation and high-pitched, feminine laughter floated out to them through the open windows. "It seems as if the Scudamores already have company tonight," observed Conway.

"Mebbe we'd better move right on, then," said Johnny uneasily. "They wouldn't want any strays buttin' in."

But Conway had already dismounted and was knocking at the door. "We'll probably get a better dinner if they're having company. Mrs. Scudamore and the girls are good cooks when the occasion demands."

Major Scudamore, dressed in the mess uniform, now worn and faded, of a famous British cavalry regiment, opened the door. He was a big, square-shouldered man with short, reddish-grey hair that bristled on the top of his head. His fierce blue eyes blinked rapidly in a face the



colour of old parchment. "Why, Conway!" he boomed, in a voice well calculated to reach every corner of some imaginary parade ground, "I'm glad to see you. Just in time for dinner, by gad! A special occasion, too—the Queen's birthday. A few friends have dropped in—and more are welcome."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Major," said Conway, with a fine assumption of embarrassment, "but of course, if you have company—"

"Dammit, man," shouted the Major, "my table can always accommodate one or two or a dozen more! Put up your horses and stop talking nonsense."

"You're very kind. Major, this is a friend of mine, Johnny Bradford, just up from the States. He got mixed up in the cattle raid last night—"

"What!" The Major's already protuberant eyes almost popped out of his head. With a movement surprisingly quick, he snatched up a huge rifle that stood behind the door. "Dammit, man, why haven't you got him tied up? I lost fifteen head in the raid—got 'em back a hundred pounds lighter apiece. We'll lock him up in the cellar. Looks a killer—every inch of him!"

Conway held up his hand. "Just a minute, Major," he said. "Bradford really *is* a friend of mine. He's the man who milled the herd last night. You can thank him for getting your cattle back."

"Oh." The Major's eyes slowly slipped back into their sockets. "I'm sorry, Bradford," he said, as he replaced the gun behind the door. "Might have known that since you were with Conway you'd be all right. Now take your horses down to the stable—you know the way, Conway. You'll excuse me if I go back to my guests."

As soon as he was safely inside the stable Johnny gave vent to his astonishment. "Tell me, is the old boy all there? Right in the head, I mean?"

"Of course he is," said Conway. "All the Major is

trying to do is to introduce the kind of life he's always known into an alien environment. The result is a bit fantastic, but it's the way the Major keeps his self-respect."

Then suddenly he began to shake with laughter. Johnny looked at him curiously. "What's so funny all of a sudden?"

Conway wiped his eyes. "Nothing—nothing at all. I'm just thinking of the way you're going to look when you meet Mrs. Scudamore and the girls."

Chapter VI

THE SCUDAMORE HOUSE CONSISTED OF THREE ROOMS—A kitchen, a large living-room (which contained a double bed), and a bedroom at the back which had the appearance of having been tacked on as an afterthought. When Johnny and Conway were ushered into the living-room, dinner was in full swing around the magnificent mahogany dining-table, which together with the chairs and side-board formed an incongruous contrast to the rough, unpainted pine walls and the splintering soft-wood floor.

"My dear," said Major Scudamore to the woman who sat at the foot of the table, "may I present Mr. Bradford, a friend of Conway's here?"

Mrs. Scudamore bowed. She was grey-haired and petite; once she had no doubt been pretty, but time and the Major had left their marks, and the colour had long since faded from her eyes and complexion, save for two spots of red, made up of thousands of tiny, reticulated veins, that glowed in the centre of her cheeks. Like her husband, she had pale blue, prominent eyes; they shifted nervously on either side of a thin, curved nose that accentuated her striking resemblance to an eager bird. She wore an elaborate evening-dress of faded pink that had doubtless been fashionable twenty years before. "So glad you were able to drop in, Mr. Bradford," she murmured. "You must come oftener." Then she bowed to Conway. "And *dear* Mr. Conway, how are *you*? It's *ages* since you've called. Always so busy saving people that your friends never set eyes on you."

While Mrs. Scudamore and Conway exchanged polite expressions of mutual pleasure, Major Scudamore introduced Johnny to the rest of the party. The Scudamore girls, Jane and Lucy, spinsters of uncertain vintage who, like their mother, were resplendent in evening-dresses of a bygone decade, looked at him with condescending interest. The guests were Judith Sumner, the district schoolteacher, and a slim, fair-haired young Englishman named Jack McIvor, who held out his hand with a friendly smile. "How do you do, Mr. Bradford, or should I say pleased to meet you?"

"Say whatever you feel," Johnny grinned. "Howdy, mister."

Places were quickly arranged at the table, and Johnny and Conway sat down to great platters of roast beef and potatoes. There were no vegetables. "In the old country," murmured Mrs. Scudamore plaintively, "there would be spinach, brussels sprouts, artichokes—but here—"

"Now, Mama," interposed Lucy, "we mustn't complain." Then she turned to Johnny. "Mr. Bradford, in this country it is simply impossible to secure a competent gardener. But, of course, there are compensations."

"Yes, indeed," Jane chimed in brightly. "The air—the—the—"

Mrs. Scudamore laid down her knife and fork. "But I really think that Canadian air is *much* over-rated. Don't you agree, Mr. Bradford? So full of dust and the smell of cattle. It's really not healthy."

"Why don't you stop breathing it, then," growled Major Scudamore morosely from his place at the head of the table.

"Oh, Papa!" cried Jane. But her exclamation was automatic. She was not really shocked.

Mrs. Scudamore again addressed Johnny. This time there was a confidential note in her voice. "There were

Bradfords at Winghampton in Surrey—a county family. Lady Eleanor—the third daughter, you know—married the Vicar of Little Epping last year and there was a good deal of talk about it. Actually, there was no question of her marrying beneath her, as ill-informed people thought, because the Vicar—I'm sorry to appear so dreadfully stupid, but I simply *cannot* recall his name at the moment—is related on the distaff side to the Earl of Pembroke! In fact, it was a *very* good match indeed, and Agatha—that's her mother and a very dear friend of mine—was thrilled—simply thrilled. You are perhaps a connection?"

Johnny shook his head. "My people came from Ireland."

"From Ireland? Oh, dear!" Mrs. Scudamore seemed faintly shocked.

Major Scudamore lifted his head, and his eyes were popping. "Ireland—you come from Ireland? Then I suppose you're a rebel, too, like Conway here?"

"Of course, he is. All good Irishmen are," said Conway. There was a smile around the corners of his mouth but his eyes were grave.

"Yes, by gad! And the Irish are just like the Indians—the only good ones are dead!" Major Scudamore brought his fist down on the table with a resounding crash.

"Papa! Papa!" ejaculated the girls simultaneously.

The schoolteacher, Judith Sumner, had so far taken no part in the conversation. Now she spoke, in a voice unexpectedly rich and deep. "Don't you think, Major Scudamore, that Parnell is a very great man?"

The name of Parnell was familiar enough to Johnny; the foreman of the ranch in the Judith Basin where he had worked the previous winter was an Irishman, given to holding forth at every opportunity on the tribulations of his native land and the work of Parnell on behalf of Irish independence. But it surprised him to find that a country

schoolteacher should be interested in the career of an Irish patriot five thousand miles away. He looked at Judith Sumner with frank curiosity. She was a woman of perhaps thirty-five, with lustrous dark hair and eyes, all the darker and more lustrous by comparison with the faded gold and cornflower blue of the Scudamore sisters. Her hands were long and beautifully shaped. She wore a simple, flowered frock, but even Johnny was aware that the dress had not come from any store in the North-West Territories.

Major Scudamore was so highly incensed by Judith Sumner's question that for a moment he seemed to be on the verge of apoplexy. "Parnell?" he roared. "Parnell? Let me tell you, Miss Sumner, if ever I got my hands on Parnell I'd hang him as high as Hamen!"

There was a strain of silence following the Major's outburst. Judith Sumner was looking, not at the Major, but at Steven Conway whose face had grown suddenly dark. Then the young Englishman, McIvor, unexpectedly laughed. "Well, so you'll never have the chance to hang Parnell so long as you stay in the West, but by all reports you may have a few rebels to put down right in your own back yard."

At once the tension relaxed and a hubbub of conversation broke out. "Isn't it *dreadful*!" wailed Mrs. Scudamore. "Think of those wretched Indians fighting against the dear Queen! Surely, Mr. Conway, you can make them see how wicked it would be?"

The cloud had passed away from Conway's face and his smile was genuine. "I don't think you need to be afraid of being scalped in your bed, Mrs. Scudamore," he assured her.

Mrs. Scudamore's hands flew to her elaborately untidy coiffure. "Dear me, what a dreadful idea!"

"After all," continued Conway, "the Bloods and the Piegans have always been reasonably well behaved."

"They'd better be," said Major Scudamore resolutely. "I hear that Jack Stewart is organizing a corps of mounted volunteers to patrol the borders of the reserves. We'll fix the red-skins, by gad, if they try to start anything!"

"I don't think the police are expecting trouble in these parts," said McIvor. "The storm centre seems to be up north, around Prince Albert and Duck Lake. The Metis and the Crees are the real trouble-makers."

"The real trouble-makers," said Conway sharply, "are the white men."

"There you go on your favourite hobby-horse," growled the Major. "But it simply won't wash, Conway. What about Riel? Is he white?"

"The rotten half of him is," said Conway.

"Riel?" interposed Johnny. "What's he got to do with it?"

"Nothing—yet," said Major Scudamore. "But there's talk that he's being asked to go north to organize the Metis—the French half-breeds. He's one himself."

"Ever come across him, Johnny?" There was lively interest in Conway's voice.

"I saw him once or twice in Montana. Seemed to be minding his own business. But I guess he's a trouble-maker, all right, like you say."

"Must have Irish blood in him, then," grunted Major Scudamore. But this time there was no malice in his voice. "Seriously, Conway, we're counting on you to keep the Piegans and Bloods in order. We don't want to have to kill them off. Too much like shooting sitting birds. Not that I'd mind a *good* scrap." And his eyes rested regretfully on the big elephant gun behind the door.

"If the Metis and Indians rise," said Conway deliberately, "we'll have no one but ourselves to blame."

The Major snorted. "I suppose we're to blame when they steal our cattle? Last night, for instance?"

"You're sure the Indians stole your cattle last night?" Conway's voice was dangerously quiet.

"Who else? Fraser picked the herd up on the Blood reserve."

"Red-skins don't usually rustle big herds," said Johnny. "They go after the small stuff—strays, herds of ten, twelve, mebbe. Last night's raid was on a pretty big scale."

The Major grunted and let the matter drop. The Scudamore girls brought on the dessert—a steamed batter pudding rich in suet and raisins—and the Major produced a large bottle of whisky, and some home-made wine for the ladies. Johnny, to please Mrs. Scudamore, choked down a glassful of her wine. Conway alone among the gathering drank water. The conversation became general and animated. Voices rose. But Judith Sumner was silent, withdrawn into herself. From time to time Johnny regarded her with admiration and puzzled interest. She failed utterly to conform to the conventional pattern of school-ma'am. One could not even be sure about her origin; the delicate, olive-tinted skin and full, sensuous mouth were Latin, or perhaps Semitic, but never Anglo-Saxon. She was like some of the women, only ten times more refined, whom Johnny had seen in the Mexican border towns along the Rio Grande. Her eyes strayed often to Conway's face, and there was in them a look of vague apprehension mingled with something less easily definable.

"Of course, Mr. Bradford," said Mrs. Scudamore, *sotto voce*, "Mr. Conway calls himself a non-conformist—a Methodist, I think, or it may be a Unitarian. But it's only his Irish nature asserting itself. I'm sure that deep down in his heart he's an Anglican. But it would go against the grain to admit it."

"We were hoping to get back for the season," Jane was explaining to Judith Sumner, who listened with a pleasant

smile and a far-away look on her face, "but now with all the Indian troubles I'm afraid we must put off the trip until next year. No earthly use in going, of course, if one were to miss the season."

For years, now, the Scudamore girls had been going back to the Old Country for the "season." It was an illusion which harmed no one, because it deceived no one, except perhaps the Scudamore girls themselves. And for them, the anticipation was a perennial excitement which the passing of the years intensified rather than diminished.

Presently the Major beat upon the table with his fist for silence. Then he rose to his feet. "Ladies and gentlemen, the Queen!"

"The Queen—God bless her!" Glasses clinked, and the toast was drunk. Then Lucy Scudamore, in a shrill soprano, struck up the national anthem and the toast was celebrated with musical honours.

"Unfortunately," said the Major, "the ladies are unable to retire to the drawing-room—"

"Next year," Mrs. Scudamore explained to Johnny, "we are building. The house will be a replica of Major Scudamore's family home in Wilts. Later, perhaps, an avenue of trees—"

"However," continued the Major, glaring at his wife. "I feel sure that the ladies will grant us permission to smoke."

Permission having been graciously granted, the Major produced a box of cigars from the sideboard, and the bottle of whisky was again circulated. Toasts followed one another in quick succession to the homeland, to the ladies, to absent friends, to the Empire. The level of whisky in the bottle crept steadily lower. But presently Jack McIvor turned to Conway. "I'm afraid, Mr. Conway, that Major Scudamore is running out of ideas. Deplorable state of affairs when there's so much whisky left. I suggest that you open up new vistas for us."

"Hear, hear!" trilled the Misses Scudamore.

The Major nodded approval. "By all means, Conway," he said. Then his voice rose. "Order--order! A toast from Mr. Conway."

Steven Conway rose to his feet and lifted his glass. There was sudden silence in the room. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, and his voice was loud and clear, "I give you a toast to the good health and success of a very gallant patriot and gentleman, Charles Stuart Parnell!"

Chapter VII

THERE WAS A MOMENT OF SHOCKED, INCREDULOUS SILENCE. No one spoke or moved. Then Judith Sumner stood up and raised her glass. One by one the others got to their feet, their faces registering emotions ranging from the merely bewildered to the outraged. Jane Scudamore tittered foolishly. "After all," she said, "the Bible says we should love our enemies." Major Scudamore was the last to stand up. His face was black as a thundercloud.

"As a loyal subject of Her Imperial Majesty," he said, "I cannot drink to the success of her enemies. But it will give me great pleasure to drink to their eternal damnation!"

Again it was Jack McIvor who saved the day. "Trust you, sir, not to miss the chance to drink, anyway," he said with an infectious grin. There was a burst of nervous giggles from the Scudamore women and again the tension relaxed.

Conway, who had drunk the toast almost immediately upon proposing it, regarded the Major with an almost affectionate eye. "I like a man who stands up for what he believes," he said. "I knew you wouldn't drink the toast, you old rascal. I thought, though, that it would be interesting to see you squirm. But," he added deliberately, "I meant that toast."

"I know you did, you black-hearted rebel," grunted the Major. "But I suppose a man can't be blamed for the blood he inherits."

There were no more toasts, the Major and Jack McIvor dispensing with that formality before refreshing themselves, and no more acrimonious debate. The party broke up

shortly before midnight, and the guests, with the exception of Judith Sumner, who was spending the night with the Scudamores, prepared to go their ways. After good-byes and assurances of meetings in the near future had been exchanged all round, Mrs. Scudamore drew Johnny aside. "Mr. Bradford, I'm *sure* that you must be a connection of the Winghampton Bradfords. The upper lip—the parting of the hair—both unmistakable! Possibly a member of the family went over to Ireland in the eighteenth century or thereabouts and married a native girl. There's always a good deal of that sort of thing in the colonies, I'm afraid. But I *will* mention you the very next time I write to Lady Eleanor—she's the third daughter, you know, the one who married the Vicar of Little Epping. A very charming girl—very. I'm so sorry I can't recall her married name."

"That's mighty kind of you, ma'm," Johnny assured her gravely. "I'll bet Lady Eleanor will be tickled pink to hear about me."

He joined Conway and Jack McIvor outside and they went down to the barn to saddle their horses. Major Scudamore, his elephant gun tucked under his arm, led the way. "Dam' red-skins may go on the warpath at any time," he explained vaguely. "Treacherous beggars, no matter what Conway says. Good idea to be always ready for 'em."

After another round of farewells the three men rode off into the night. At the first turn in the trail Jack McIvor drew rein. "My road lies yonder," he said solemnly, pointing north with a wavering hand. "Good-night, Mr. Conway; good-night, Mr. Bradford. I've been very pleased to meet you." Then with a wild, yodelling whoop he raced off across the prairie. For a moment he appeared silhouetted against the skyline on the crest of a ridge, then he dropped from sight. But his voice continued to rise and fall on the night, as he sang at the top of his lungs the old cowboy lament:



"Oh, bury me not on the lone pray-ree
In a narrow grave just six by three. . . ."

"I'm afraid that if McIvor continues the pace that's just where he'll end up," said Conway.

"Remittance man, I figger," said Johnny.

"Yes, the usual story. One of the best-hearted chaps in the world, but no balance. A fine education, of course—Winchester, Oxford, that sort of thing. I suppose he got into a scrape of some kind. Now he's a puncher on the Bar Diamond, about ten miles north. He's a good cowhand when he's sober."

Johnny nodded comprehendingly. In the past he had encountered many men like McIvor—sons of good families, well educated, well mannered, often charming, but one and all victims of an instability which made it impossible for them to adjust themselves permanently to any society. The stories about these men were legion. Johnny himself knew of a young peer living on a lonely ranch in Wyoming who had ridden thirty miles through a raging blizzard in full evening dress, to a Christmas dinner at a "neighbouring" ranch. He was lifted from his horse in a solid piece, but thawed out in time to become the life of the party. The Scudamores, too, were not unique. The Old Country family, waging a hopeless but pertinacious struggle to retain the customs of its class, has always been a characteristic feature of frontier society.

The two men rode beneath the light of the blazing stars, the silence broken only by the soft fall of the horses' hoofs in the prairie sod, and the weird howling of the coyotes far off in the foothills. Then abruptly Conway spoke. "Johnny, you've come to a country where there's going to be trouble before long. No doubt you gathered as much from what was said at dinner tonight."

"Yes," Johnny agreed soberly. "I knew that things were unsettled up here before I headed across the line."

There was a lot of talk in Montana last winter. Riel hung out down in the Judith Basin for quite a spell."

"Riel is a strange mixture," said Conway. "Two-thirds idealist, one-third madman—or is it possible to distinguish between the two? But he's not as bad as people say, although he has done some evil things. And there's a sort of justice on his side that men like Scudamore can't see. After all, he's fighting in the cause of the oppressed." He spoke almost as if he had personal knowledge of Riel.

"Yeah," said Johnny sceptically, "but what's the use of startin' a rebellion—if that's what he's figgerin' on doin'—when the Metis and Indians are licked before they ever fire a shot? They won't get anywhere, and there'll be a lot of bloodshed, and hard feelin's for years afterwards."

"The great man," said Conway, "fights when there doesn't seem to be any use in fighting."

"You figger Riel is a great man?"

"No," said Conway almost contemptuously, "I don't. In many ways he's mean and petty and stupid. But he's a man with a dream, and it's a good dream. And, besides, no man is ignoble who fights in a worthy cause. And the cause of the Metis and Indians is worthy."

Johnny dropped the reins on Patsy's neck and rolled a cigarette. "I guess so," he said slowly. "Though down across the line I ain't found many white men with much good to say about the Indians."

"You won't up here, either. Everywhere the Indian stands between the white man and the satisfaction of his greed. That's his only crime. But from the white man's point of view there is none greater."

Johnny nodded in the darkness. "I've always found the red-skin a square-shooter," he said. Then he asked curiously, "How do they take to your preachin'?"

"They'd listen to me and believe if it weren't for the Christians. Their medicine-men and their chiefs point to the people who have ill-treated and corrupted them, sold

them rotten liquor, stolen from them, plundered them of their land and their possessions. 'There,' say the medicine-men, 'are the followers of the God whom this man preaches.' It's no good arguing that these men *aren't* Christians. The Indians think of Christ as the white man's God, and knowing the white man as they do, they're bound to distrust his God. And it would be so easy to save them—if it weren't for the Christians." There was sudden anguish in Conway's voice. "I know that the Indian can be mean and cruel and warped, but underneath it all he's far nearer Christ than most white men. Have you ever known of an Indian to go hungry if one of his brothers had a scrap of pemmican—ever know an Indian to try to store up food and goods for himself alone? To share is instinctive with him. It's not the white man's way—but it was Christ's."

Johnny was silent. After a while Conway went on, talking more to himself than his companion. "If the Indians rise under Riel, there will be bloodshed for sure and some men will die and Riel will be defeated. But it might serve some purpose. Even among white men there is sometimes such a thing as a social conscience."

"You figger there'll be fighting?"

"Sometimes I'm sure of it. For fifteen years now we've been driving the Indians off the plains, stealing their food, penning them up in reservations, corrupting them with whisky, doing our best to destroy them body and soul. Now, up north along the Saskatchewan, we're proposing to steal the land from the Metis. If Riel returns to lead them—"

Conway broke off suddenly, as if aware of Johnny's presence for the first time since he had begun to talk. "But the Piegans and the Bloods are my children, Johnny," he continued, in a different tone of voice. "I've worked among them these fifteen years. I've helped to drive the whisky traders and the horse thieves off their reservations, and I've saved the souls of a few of them at least. And I'm not going to be letting harm come to them now."

"Figger I know how you feel," said Johnny softly.

"All the same, I've thought, many and many a time, that it would be better for the red man if he disappeared from the earth in one last great, flaming hour of destruction, than to go down through the years and the generations, becoming smaller in numbers, weaker in body and poorer in spirit until he dwindles away into extinction. For such is his destiny."

They camped for the remainder of the night near a grove of cottonwoods at the foot of a long, gently-sloping hill. Johnny, who was tired out after his strenuous day following upon a sleepless and exciting night, curled up in his blanket and almost immediately fell asleep. But before he slipped off into unconsciousness he was dimly aware of Conway on his knees a yard or two away, and of the subdued murmur of his voice: "Lord, now lettest Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word. For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people, to be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of Thy people Israel."

But the voice was not that of a man who had found the peace for which he prayed.

Chapter VIII

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, AN HOUR OR TWO AFTER SUN-UP, Johnny and Conway rode into Fort Macleod. Built about ten years previously as a Mounted Police fort, Macleod was now a flourishing trading centre. But in spite of its judicial and commercial importance it was, like all frontier towns, unimpressive to the eye. Its single street was little more than a continuation of the prairie trail flanked on either side by a score or less of unpretentious log or frame buildings. Most of the buildings were stores which handled a miscellaneous assortment of goods designed to meet the needs of the ranchers and farmers of the surrounding territory.

The new police fort lay about two miles west of the original log structure, which had been abandoned the year before. It stood on the high bench land on the south side of the Old Man's River, well beyond reach of the spring floods. The buildings were laid out in the form of a rectangle and, unlike those of the old fort, were of frame construction. It was a virtually self-contained unit, the buildings including living quarters for officers and men, workshops, stores, a hospital and an arsenal.

Conway and Johnny breakfasted unsatisfactorily at the one eating-house in town. Half-a-dozen guests, three of them young Englishmen in breeches and riding boots of excellent cut, were gathered around the communal table in the dining-room. All the men knew Conway, and spoke to him briefly but deferentially. One of them, a grizzled old-timer with drooping walrus moustaches which he dexterously flipped over the edges of his cup every time



he sluiced a mouthful of coffee, demanded to know if Conway were keeping the red-skins in order. But the question was purely rhetorical. It was gradually being impressed on Johnny that the settlers in the territory bordering the Indian reserves were relying on the Irish parson even more than on the Mounted Police to keep the Piegans and Bloods under control in case the northern tribes and Metis should revolt.

After breakfast the two men rode to the police fort. They left their horses in charge of a constable and went at once to the orderly room. A tall and exceedingly handsome sergeant who sported a magnificent pair of black moustaches was on duty.

"Good morning, Lavery," said Conway. "The Superintendent in?"

Sergeant Lavery twirled his moustaches. "The Superintendent is in and he'll be honoured to see you," he said. There was a faintly supercilious inflection in his voice. He glanced at Johnny curiously but did not speak to him.

They went into the adjoining office. Superintendent Cotton stood up and greeted Conway with outstretched hand. "I'm delighted to see you, Conway," he said. "In fact, I was on the point of sending for you."

"No doubt you've heard that I'm chaperoning a dangerous criminal," smiled Conway. "Superintendent, this is Johnny Bradford, a friend of mine just up from Montana. Johnny can tell you something about the raid the night before last. He's the man who milled the cattle."

"Oh?" The Superintendent resumed his seat and looked at Johnny appraisingly. "Sit down, both of you. I want to talk to you particularly about the Indians, Conway, but that can wait. I'd like to hear what Bradford has to tell us. Particularly since I've sent a constable back with Fraser to bring him in!"

Simply and without evasion Johnny told what had happened. When he had finished, the Superintendent sat

for a time drumming nervously on the desk top with long, spatulate fingers. Then he addressed Conway. "Did you ever hear of such melodramatic nonsense?" he asked, almost plaintively. "Masked raiders belong to comic opera or wild west shows, not a civilized, well-ordered community. But the trouble is that the raids are real!" The Superintendent got abruptly to his feet and began to pace angrily back and forth in the restricted space behind his desk. "Nearly seven hundred head lost in a few weeks, and three hundred more would have gone last night if it hadn't been for Bradford here."

Conway laughed. "It's hard on the reputation of the Force, isn't it, Superintendent? But at least the rustlers are keeping you from getting prematurely fat and senile."

"Humph," grunted Cotton. "Not much chance of getting fat these days. The Hornby outfit have lost five hundred head, and the shareholders back in the Old Country are beginning to ask questions in Parliament. So the manager tells me, anyway."

"You must admit the rustlers show good judgment," Conway comforted him. "They always go after the live-stock of the big absentee owners."

"You Irishmen never have had any regard for the rights of absentee landlords. But don't forget that some of the small fellows have suffered, too. Fraser has lost about thirty head so far, Scudamore ten or twelve, and the Hitchcocks and the Harneys more than they can afford. And they'd all have lost a lot more if the last raid had come off."

"And serve them right," said Conway. "They shouldn't let their steers drift over onto the Hornby range."

"You seem to know a lot about the raid," said Cotton. "Look here, Conway, were any of your Indians mixed up in it?"

"I thought you had decided long ago that the rustlers came from across the line. Why have you changed your mind?"

"I haven't," said the Superintendent. "But I have to consider all the possibilities. Tell us, Bradford, did any of the men you saw look like Indians?"

"Pretty hard to tell," said Johnny noncommittally. "It was dark, and they were masked. They were all wearin' white men's clothes and ridin' white men's saddles." A feeling of sympathy for Conway prevented him from voicing a doubt in his mind. Some at least of the yells that had rung out that night had sounded suspiciously like Indian war-whoops.

The Superintendent again turned to Conway. "How are the Piegans behaving these days?"

"You ought to know, Superintendent. You have enough of your hired help riding the reservation to keep you well posted."

"Oh, come, come," said Cotton impatiently. "Sergeant Laverty and Constable Jordan ride over certain trails on patrol as a matter of course. But you know as well as I do that it's only a formality. We're counting on you, Conway, to tell us what really goes on. And if there's trouble, we'll expect you to help us keep the Piegans and Bloods quiet."

"Very good." There was a sudden glint in Conway's eye. "If Laverty's patrol is a formality, then I suggest that you take your men away and use them where they're needed. Frankly, Superintendent, the police make my job ten times more difficult. I trust Eagle Tail and he trusts me. But your red-coats are coming between us. It looks as if Eagle Tail and his young men have *got* to do what I suggest. And they don't like it."

"I see your point, Conway," the Superintendent admitted. "But I'm afraid that for the time being the patrols must continue."

"It's customary in police and military circles to do officially what one unofficially disapproves of," said Conway dryly. Then he spoke with unusual vigour.

"Mark my words, Superintendent, you and your men will get all the glory for keeping the southern tribes in order—unless Stewart's trumpery chocolate soldiers cut in on you—but you and I know that it will be the missionaries who will have done the real work—MacLean and I among the Bloods and Piegans, and that quaint little Papist, Father Lacombe, among the Blackfeet."

Unexpectedly the Superintendent chuckled. "I never knew an Irishman who didn't hate the police—or else join the force," he said. "But come now, Conway. I do know how much we owe you, and so does every man in the North-West Territories. And I don't think I've ever withheld my appreciation. You've made the policeman's job a hundred times easier. But it's still a job—and a big one. And the patrols stick."

"I suppose I can't blame you, Superintendent," said Conway, "although I don't think it's the wisest course. But you asked me about the Piegans. They're restless. So are the Bloods and the Blackfeet. All the tribes are—north and south. That's inevitable, there are so many rumours circulating among them. And besides, they've had seven years now in which to learn just how much they signed away when they made their treaty with the whites in 1877. Then the old men harangue the young bucks with tales of the West as it was before the white man came. It's propaganda that's hard to counter because it's so much more than mere propaganda—it's the truth."

"But they'll do what you say?"

"I think so—up to a point at least. Eagle Tail is a level head. Not so shrewd as Crowfoot, but just as honest. And he has control over his men."

"As a matter of fact," said Cotton, "I think that the danger locally has been grossly exaggerated. The Force is fairly strong, Stewart's Mounted Militia are ready to take a hand, and a force can be formed in Calgary almost overnight if need be. And besides, even if the Indians

did commit the supreme folly and rebel, their arms are antiquated and inadequate."

"Most of them have Winchesters," said Conway.

"Yes, old-fashioned ones, and they have a limited supply of ammunition. We see to it that they get no more than enough to meet their everyday needs. They can't have any in reserve."

"How do things look up north?"

"Not too bad at the moment, but there are rumours that Riel is expected almost any time. A delegation has been sent by the Metis to Montana to bring him back. If he does go north, I think trouble is likely. The Metis and the Cree Indians have much more specific grievances than the Blackfeet. And Riel will make the most of them."

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of two ranchers with a report of some stolen horses, and Conway and Johnny took their leave. As they rode down the street of Macleod, Conway looked quizzically at his companion. "What's the matter, Johnny? You haven't said a word since we left headquarters?"

"I been thinkin'," said Johnny vaguely.

"About what?"

"Thinkin' that mebbe I'd join the Force. Seems as if it might be an interestin' life."

Conway laughed. "The uniform is pretty, anyway. But you'd hate being a policeman, Johnny. You've lived the free and unrestricted life too long."

"I ain't so sure about that," said Johnny. "But I'll do some more thinkin' before I make up my mind."

They rode on through the town and into the open country beyond. "And now," said Conway, abruptly dismissing the subject of the police force, "suppose we pay a little call on the Frasers? The ranch is only ten miles north-west of here, and it's a grand day for a horseback ride."



Chapter IX

THE TRAIL FROM MACLEOD TO THE FRASER RANCH WOUND across the great slopes of the foothills under the incredibly blue dome of the western sky. The mountains lay almost straight ahead, miles distant, their snow-covered peaks sparkling in the dazzling sunshine. Johnny and Conway rode side by side, following the two distinct tracks that wagon wheels had cut in the prairie sod. Conway, in a mood of unusual loquacity, talked freely about his work among the Indians.

"Fifteen years of it," he said, "fifteen years, Johnny, and five of knocking about among the plains tribes before I was ordained."

"You turned preacher after you came out from Ireland?"

"Yes." Conway fell silent, a far-away look on his face.

"Folks say the Old Country is mighty nice to look at," hazarded Johnny, who was in a conversational mood. "But I reckon this ought to be compensation." With a sweep of his arm he indicated the rolling foothills and the mountains beyond.

"Yes," said Conway, "the old land has nothing to show that's half so spectacular. All the same," he went on, with kindling enthusiasm, "nothing can ever take the place of the Nine Glens or the Fairy Loch or Slieve Donnard of a June morning when the gorse is in bloom. What I miss most of all is the unexpectedness of things. Here you know what lies ahead of you. When you turn a corner you know exactly what you're going to see. But in Ireland you never know. Where do you think the Fairy Loch is?"

You'd think it would be in a quiet valley with hills all around—but not a bit of it. It's right on the top of a mountain! Think of that now! And then there's the green of it all—not a hard, brilliant green like this—but soft—soft and velvety. And the mountains, Johnny—every one with a personality of its own, and every one knowable! The Rockies are magnificent—they take your breath away—but they're remote, beyond reach and understanding. The hills of home are different. They're human somehow, and lovely the way a woman is."

There was a lilting brogue in Conway's voice which always crept in when he was deeply moved. Then he pulled himself up short. "But that's enough," he said, almost abashed. "I mustn't be letting my feelings run away with me. But it's a grand country, Johnny—a grand country."

Once more he fell silent. Johnny let him dream, and they rode on along the trail while the sun dropped towards the horizon and the day crept imperceptibly towards the twilight.

It was dusk when they rode into the Fraser yard. For the first time Johnny had a chance to appraise with critical eye the buildings which were grouped in the shelter of a large grove of cottonwoods. The barns were freshly painted, red with white trim; and the house, set well back from the barns, was built in a style reminiscent of the colonial houses that he had known in New England. There was even a hedge of some sort running around the square of green grass in front. Flowerbeds, in which green things were beginning to appear, were clearly defined by carefully laid, whitewashed stones. A gravelled path led to the door. In front of the door two puppies were squabbling amicably over possession of a bone.

"Looks nice and restful," said Johnny.

"As fine people as there are in the country," said Conway as he dismounted. "Linda looks after the house



and makes a grand job of it. Her mother died just after they came here five years ago."

They tied their horses to a long hitching-rail and walked up the gravelled path. The puppies came bounding to meet them with ecstatic yelps. Then the kitchen door opened and Matt Fraser himself appeared. He was a tall, thick-set man, blue of eye and ruddy of complexion. His still-abundant hair, and heavy moustache were iron-grey. "Bless my soul, it's Conway!" he shouted. "Come away in, man—come away in. Supper's over long ago, but there's plenty in the house. Linda will have a bite ready for you in no time." Like Linda, he spoke with a Scots burr, only much more pronounced.

"Fine, Mr. Fraser," said Conway. "We'll do just that, as soon as we've seen to our horses."

"No, no—come in, come in. One of the boys will look after the nags." Fraser lifted his voice in a mighty bellow, and one of the cowhands appeared at the door of the bunkhouse. He acknowledged Fraser's shouted instructions with a leisurely wave of the hand.

Fraser led the way into the kitchen. It was a big room, spotless and cheerful. Linda, who was bending over the range, looked up as the men entered. "Why, hello, Mr. Conway," she exclaimed, smiling with obvious pleasure as she came forward. "It's about time you paid us a visit."

Conway took her outstretched hand. "It's good to see you, Linda," he said. Then he drew Johnny forward. "I think you've met my old friend, Johnny Bradford."

Linda Fraser flushed. "Yes," she said coldly, "I've met Mr. Bradford. You have a very wide circle of acquaintances, Mr. Conway?"

"Just what I've been thinkin' mysel'," interposed Matt Fraser. Like Conway, he tended, when under emotional strain, to lapse into the dialect of his own land. Now he thrust his face within six inches of Johnny's nose.

"Weren't ye lyin' locked up in yon shed no later than yesterday mornin' with a bump on your pow that should have kept ye still for a fortnight?" he demanded ferociously.

"I was," admitted Johnny, "but—"

Fraser whirled about and caught up a rifle which stood in the corner of the kitchen. "Conway," he said, "ye'll be interested to learn that your friend Mr. Bradford or whatever he calls himsel' is none other than one of the rustlers who were running our cattle off two nights ago. We picked him up in a gully with a broken head. We brought him here and locked him up in the shed beyond, but he got out and away. This time we'll mount guard in turn until the police take him in charge."

"Put up your gun, Matt," said Conway. "Bradford really *is* a friend of mine. We've just come from having a chat with Superintendent Cotton."

Briefly he related the circumstances of Johnny's misadventures. Fraser put the gun back in the corner and reached out a great hand. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bradford. I've been under a grave misapprehension. But I hope ye'll bear me no ill-will."

"Not at all," Johnny assured him. "The evidence was all against me. It was mighty good of you not to string me up from a cottonwood right on the spot."

"We don't do that sort of thing in this country," said Fraser. "And besides," he added, as a kind of after-thought, "there weren't any cottonwoods of the right size available."

Johnny and Conway cleaned up in the little wash-room adjoining the kitchen. Just before they sat down to supper, Matt Fraser spoke to Johnny. "Just to satisfy my natural and burnin' curiosity, Mr. Bradford," he said in obvious embarrassment, "would ye mind tellin' me how ye got out of yon shed?"

Johnny shot a quick glance at Linda, who was just setting a platter of ham and eggs in front of him. Her



face was fiery red. He shrugged his shoulders. "Whoever put the bar across the door didn't make a very good job of it," he said.

"Humph." Fraser's brow puckered. "Slipped out when ye banged the door, did it? I put that bar across mysel'. I'm glad now that ye got away, Mr. Bradford, but I was careless—criminal careless."

In the conversation that followed it became apparent that, like all the settlers in the district, Matt Fraser was worried about a possible Indian rising—worried, and as Johnny was quick to sense, badly misinformed. Poor communications between the southern part of the Territories and the districts around Edmonton and Prince Albert, where the disaffection had its centre, had bred many rumours which in turn had multiplied among themselves. It was said that Riel was already back in Canada, that his lieutenant, Gabriel Dumont, had five thousand men ready to rise at a given word, that plans for the destruction of the C.P.R. as far east as Medicine Hat had already been laid, that the Blackfeet, Piegans and Bloods were under orders from Riel's agent, and that the police knew nothing! Conway did his best to allay Fraser's fears.

"My word for it, Matt," he said, "the Piegans will do what I say, and I think the same is true of the Bloods. I can't speak for the Blackfeet, but I think that Crowfoot is far too honest—and too smart—to involve his people. He took the oath of loyalty in '77 and he'll stick to it, in spite of the fact that by now he realizes only too well how much he signed away that rightfully belonged to his people. But, of course, he had no choice."

"Well, Conway," said Fraser, repeating the phrase which had become almost a slogan in the district, "we're all counting on you. If any one can keep the Indians under control, you can. The trouble is," he continued, "these rumours make it hard for us to keep decent help. All the young whippersnappers who might make good

cowhands are joinin' the Force or else headin' up north where they think the excitement will be. I still have McNulty and Webber, but I need at least two more men right now. We're a week behind with the spring round-up."

"Bradford here is looking for a job," said Conway unexpectedly. "Why don't you take him? He's a good man—just up from the Chisholm and Abilene trails."

"Your say-so, Conway, is all I need," said Fraser enthusiastically. "What do ye say, laddie? Forty a month all found, and the best saddle-horses in the North-West Territories!"

"Well," began Johnny, taken aback, "I guess I'll have to have time to do some thinkin'." He looked at Linda. When Conway had made his suggestion she had got up abruptly from the table. Now, as she stood at the stove, her back seemed rigid with disapproval.

"No need to stay if ye don't like it," said Fraser, determined to strike while the iron was hot. "What about a week's trial both ways?"

Linda returned from the stove with the coffee-pot. "If Mr. Bradford doesn't really want the job I don't see why you should try to force him, Dad," she said reasonably, as she refilled the cups.

Fraser snorted with disgust. "I'm surprised at ye, Linda," he fumed, "when ye know how bad we need hands. Bradford, I'll give ye fifty a month for the summer, June to August inclusive."

But Johnny shook his head. "I'll have to talk to Superintendent Cotton first," he said.

He held out his coffee cup and Linda began to refill it. Suddenly he gave a yelp of anguish and the cup fell with a crash to the floor. Johnny leaped to his feet as hot coffee cascaded over his legs. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" cried Linda contritely. "How *could* I have been so careless!"

Johnny was skipping about, holding his trousers away from his scalded thighs. "I don't know, ma'am," he said,

"but you made a good job of it." Already a blister was forming on the back of his hand.

"Oh, dear," said Linda. "Come out to the washroom and I'll bandage your hand for you."

She took a small oil-lamp from the table near the stove and led the way to the washroom. There were ointment and a roll of bandages in the cabinet above the washstand. Linda opened the tin of ointment and spread some of the contents on Johnny's scalded hand. "You know, ma'am," said Johnny, looking reflectively at Linda's golden head as it shone in the lamplight, "you've got mighty pretty hair."

"Oh? How kind of you to notice." There was sudden colour in the girl's cheeks.

"Yes," continued Johnny judicially, "and a mighty pretty face. But all the same, you got a mean disposition. A mighty mean disposition."

"Indeed?" She threw up her head and stared at him. "And might I ask how you've reached your conclusion?"

"It was impressed on me with considerable warmth when you poured that coffee on me," he said. "You know you hadn't ought to have done that."

Her head was bent low again as she busied herself with the bandages. "It—it was an accident."

"Not by a long sight it wasn't," he said mildly. "Why did you do it?"

She straightened up with decision. "You know why."

"Because I kissed you yesterday mornin'?"

"Maybe."

"But that was just a gesture of gratitude. After all, you'd just done me a big favour."

"Just a gesture of gratitude, was it?" For no reason at all she was suddenly furiously angry. "I suppose you think I was so overcome by the sight of your simple charms when I peeked through the window that I let you out on purpose? And in a way you're right, Mr. Bradford. You



looked so helpless and—and adolescent that all of a sudden I felt terribly maternal—”

“Maternal?” said Johnny blankly.

“Yes. Like a mother, you know.”

Johnny's face flushed a fiery red. “Maternal,” he repeated. “Just like a mother. I suppose you'll be callin' me sonny next.”

“If you'd like it,” said Linda.

They returned to the kitchen. “Hand all right now?” asked Fraser solicitously. “Took ye a long time to get it fixed up. I hope it's not serious.”

“Oh, we weren't workin' on the hand all the time,” explained Johnny. “Linda was tryin' to talk me into takin' that job you offered me.”

“Why, I never—” began Linda indignantly.

“Fine, fine,” boomed Fraser. “Did you have any luck, lassie?”

“I'll say she did,” said Johnny, before Linda could open her mouth. “I'm beginnin' tomorrow. And you don't need to bother about the extra ten doliars a month.”

Chapter X

THE FRASER RANCH WAS BOUNDED ON THE SOUTH BY PILOT Creek, a tributary of the Old Man's River, and on the north by the grazing lands of the great Hornby Ranch, one of the syndicates made up of Old Country investors whose sole concern was the making of money while the cattle market boomed, without regard for the settlement and development of the country. East and west the boundaries were less clearly defined; but the Fraser cattle, perhaps twelve hundred head all told, grazed over an area of about one hundred and fifty square miles. The ranch was small in comparison with some of those adjoining, but there was always enough work, especially at round-up time, to keep several hands busy.

For nearly two weeks in an unbroken stretch Johnny and his fellow punchers were out on the range. They worked the round-up with half a dozen other outfits, including the Bar Diamond, which, next to the Hornby Syndicate, was the biggest ranch in the territory. Jack McIvor was there, and Major Scudamore. The Major had less than a hundred head of cattle, but he was on the range during the entire period of the round-up. He came for the excitement, and perhaps, as McIvor suggested, to escape for a time from the bosom of his family.

Since Johnny had taken part in round-ups all the way from Pecos to the Panhandle, and even for a year or two in Wyoming, he found the pattern of work familiar. At four in the morning, in response to Cookie's summons, all hands rolled out of bed. Cookie was a bandy-legged little French Canadian, who apparently never slept. After a



hurried breakfast of bacon, flapjacks and coffee, they saddled their horses, chosen from the remuda of sixty or seventy head, and having received instructions from the round-up boss—McKelvey, the foreman of the Bar Diamond—rode off into the brightening dawn. The cattle ranged over a wide area, but for the most part they were easily rounded up and driven to a central point. By noon a herd of several hundred head would be collected. The afternoon was given over to the more exacting routine of establishing ownership, cutting-out and branding. The men worked hard until dark, which in late May and early June did not fall until nine o'clock or later. After supper they lingered around the camp-fire long enough to smoke a pipe, or occasionally to indulge in a little close harmony, but by ten o'clock everyone would be rolled up in his blanket, dead to the world. It was a fine, healthy life, full of excitement and action, and few of the men cared for any other.

On the second last day of the round-up the outfit moved south past the Fraser ranch towards Pilot Creek. The pressure of work had eased considerably, and McKelvey decided that the entire day should be spent on the range making a final clean-up, and that the branding of the strays should be done the following morning. Johnny rode during the morning with Jack McIvor and Major Scudamore. After dinner they separated, McIvor and the Major to drive the strays they had rounded up back to the camp, Johnny to explore the bush along the banks of Pilot Creek, a brisk little mountain stream that ran pleasantly along the floor of a shallow canyon.

In mid-afternoon, after having worked the banks for several miles towards the mountains without finding any strays, Johnny came on a squat, weather-beaten clapboard building, unmistakably a schoolhouse, standing near the edge of a high bluff overlooking the creek. He rode up the steep path that wound along the face of the bluff from



the creek bed, and reached the top just as school was being dismissed. The children, with wild whoops, were racing to the stable behind the school for their saddle ponies. Johnny watched with friendly interest as they mounted and rode away in different directions. Then he rode into the schoolyard and drew up before the door of the schoolhouse. As he did so the door opened and a woman appeared on the steps. "Hello, Mr. Bradford," she said.

"Howdy, Miss Sumner," said Johnny. "It's quite a surprise seein' you here."

Judith Sumner laughed. "Why? You knew I was a schoolma'am, didn't you?"

"Well, that's what they told me that night at the Scudamores," Johnny admitted, as he slid from the saddle. "But I guess I never pictured you in my mind lookin' after a herd of mavericks like I saw rippin' across the prairie just now."

"I don't know whether to be pleased or angry, Johnny. Tell me, just *how* did you picture me in your mind?"

Johnny drew a circle in the dust with the toe of his boot. "The only kind of picture I can figger you fittin' into hasn't got any kids in it—just a lot of men," he said with an embarrassed grin.

"Thank you, Johnny," she said gravely. "At my time of life a compliment like that is doubly sweet. Do you really mean it?"

Johnny looked at her with frank curiosity. In the brilliant sunlight she appeared older than she had that night at the Scudamores; there were one or two streaks of grey in her shining black hair and tiny wrinkles around the corners of her eyes. But the light also intensified the rich, creamy lustre of her olive-tinted skin, and the red of her full, mobile lips. "I really mean it, ma'am," he said.

Unexpectedly she blushed. Then she laughed gently. "Johnny, if you were ten years older, or better still, if I were ten years younger, I'd really put your words to the test."

"Hey, wait a minute," said Johnny in alarm, "you're not goin' to start tellin' me that *you* feel maternal towards me?"

"Well, no, I'm not. But is there someone who does?"

"So she says," mumbled Johnny. Then, appalled at having blurted out what ordinarily wild horses would not have dragged from him, he abruptly changed the subject. "If you're ridin' home I might mosey along part way with you. I'm lookin' for strays, but I don't figger there are any in this district."

"Wait a minute—I'll be right back."

Judith re-entered the schoolhouse. When she reappeared a few minutes later, she had discarded her skirt and blouse and was wearing smartly cut riding breeches and the high-heeled cowboy boots of the plains. "I hope you're not shocked, Johnny," she said. "All the ladies are scandalized at my wearing pants. They say I'm a bad influence on the children. But a skirt—even a divided one—is such a nuisance when you're riding horseback."

Johnny regarded her admiringly. "Mebbe the ladies are shocked, but I figger the men don't mind much," he said. "And after all, it's the men who make up the school board."

Chapter XI

HE LED JUDITH'S HORSE, A LIVELY GREY GELDING, FROM the stable. Judith mounted and they rode together along the edge of the bluff in a westerly direction. "I live in Pilot Creek settlement," Judith explained. "I have two rooms at the Stopping House there. That's another thing the ladies don't like. They think I should board. But I prefer to be completely independent."

They rode for a time in silence. Then Judith spoke again. "What's worrying you, Johnny?"

Johnny shifted in his saddle. Then he turned a frowning face towards her. "I'm just wonderin', ma'am, how you've managed to hold the men off for so long." It was an embarrassing weakness of his that an unexpected question often startled him into saying what was in his mind without consideration of its effect. But Judith did not seem to take offence, although there was a sudden shadow in her eyes.

"I've held them at bay for a long time, haven't I?" she said. "I came out here twelve years ago. It hasn't occurred to you that perhaps a man has wanted me?"

"No," said Johnny. "You've got it hasn't."

She plucked listlessly at her horse's mane with long, nervous fingers. "I'm just not the marrying kind," she said at last. "After all, what has marriage to offer a woman out here? Only a dreary round of household chores, more and more every year as the family increases, without any of the facilities of comfortable living or any of the graces of civilized society. And above all, there's the loneliness of it—the sheer, heart-breaking, inescapable



loneliness. Oh, I know that it's a magnificent country to look at, but it has the wrong kind of beauty for a woman. A woman needs friendly little hills and soft green grass and trees around her. And flowers—flowers above all. This country is beautiful, but it's not a woman's kind of beauty. It's frightening—remote—"

She broke off abruptly and shrugged her shoulders. "What does marriage lead to, anyway?"

"Sure, sure, I know," said Johnny. "Nothin' like independence. Two rooms at the Pilot Creek Stoppin' House and the privilege of lookin' after other people's kids for thirty-forty years."

Judith said nothing. Johnny had an uncomfortable impression that she had not even heard him. Presently she spoke again. "Johnny, what do you think of Steven Conway?"

"Well," Johnny began, choosing his words with care, "I've known him for only a couple of years or so, but—"

She interrupted him with an impatient gesture. "You mean a week or two. Only a child would have been taken in with that yarn he told about your being an old friend of his."

Johnny started. "Look here, do you mean you don't believe what Conway said?"

"Of course, I don't. But as everyone else does, you don't need to worry. As far as I'm concerned, Steven, for reasons of his own, has helped you out of a scrape of some kind. And if Steven thinks that much of you, then you're all right with me."

"Ma'am," said Johnny, "you hold all the aces. But since Conway has stood by me when I was in a jam, like you surmise, I'm naturally not in a position to give an unprejudiced opinion."

"No," she said slowly, "I don't suppose you are. That's the trouble—no one is." Suddenly her voice dropped until it was barely above a whisper. "He's a great



man, Johnny--a great man. But, strange. He belongs in this country."

"I figger I know what you mean," said Johnny.

"No," she contradicted him almost rudely, "you *don't* know what I mean. No one does—not even Steven himself."

"You tell him you think he's a great man?"

"Many times. He's human enough to enjoy flattery even though he's never deceived by it. But he doesn't really understand. Because it's not flattery at all. I mean it." Then she spoke with sudden intensity. "Johnny, don't get too close to him. He's too strong."

Johnny nodded. "Figger I do know what you mean this time," he said. "He's what you might call a dominant personality."

"In some ways he's straight out of the Middle Ages," said Judith. "He would have been happy in the time of the Crusades, riding off to fight for the faith with a great big red cross on his shield, and leaving a woman behind him. Who would, of course, be faithful for seven years. Maybe twelve."

"He has a crusade right here," said Johnny.

"I know. And, thank God, he's on the side of right. He has so much power for good or evil, because he has so much power over men. He's done a great deal for the Indians, Johnny, in the face of all kinds of opposition. And they worship him. Especially the young men."

"So do some of the young women," said Johnny, again blurting out what happened to be uppermost in his mind. He immediately regretted his outspokenness. "I mean—" he floundered.

"Yes?" Judith's voice was again impersonal, disinterested.

"Oh, nothin'. I shouldn't have said that because I don't know what I'm talkin' about. I've only seen him talkin' to one Indian girl, and she was just a kid."

"Running Stream?"

"Yes, I think mebbe that was her name. Just a kid—not more than fifteen or sixteen."

"Methinks the gentleman doth protest too much," said Judith with a faint smile. "Running Stream is a very beautiful young woman. You know that as well as I do. Perhaps better." There was no trace of bitterness in her voice. She was merely stating a fact. None the less, Johnny felt it advisable to shift the conversation to less dangerous ground.

"You got quite a long way to ride, comin' and goin'," he said. "Don't you ever get a bit scared?"

Judith shook her head decisively. "Never. I know every inch of the country around here, and so does Jupiter," she said, patting her horse's neck affectionately. "As for anything I might meet—two-legged or four—" She tapped the rifle scabbard that hung down from the saddle.

"You really got a gun in there?" said Johnny.

"What else?"

"I dunno. Your lunch, mebbe."

"No, I've really got a gun in there. And I know how to use it. Would you like to see?"

A jack-rabbit had sprung up from the long grass beside the trail a few yards ahead of the horses, and was running across the prairie in long, leisurely bounds. Judith pulled a thirty-thirty Winchester from the scabbard and threw it to her shoulder. At the unexpected movement the jack-rabbit quickened his pace and streaked towards a distant grove of cottonwoods. The Winchester cracked—the rabbit gave a convulsive leap, doubled up in mid-air, and fell sprawling to the ground. Judith, her face expressionless, ejected the empty shell and slid the rifle back into its case.

Johnny was for the moment stunned into silence. "Well, if that don't beat all," he declared, when he had again found voice. "I've seen some women that could



shoot, down in the Panhandle and along the Trail, but they didn't look like women. One of 'em had a beard. And even she couldn't have nailed a jack-rabbit on the run at fifty yards—not with a shotgun she couldn't. Ma'm, you can shoot!"

"It was a fluke," Judith conceded. "But you're right. I can shoot."

They rounded a bend and drew rein on a high bluff overlooking the settlement of Pilot Creek—two stores, a Stopping House, a livery stable, a church, and half a dozen log and frame houses. "Thanks for the escort," said Judith. "If you happen to be passing through the metropolis at any time after school hours, do stop in and see me. The village society tends to pall after twelve years."

"How come the school isn't in the settlement?"

"Too far from the district centre," Judith explained. "But there's some talk of a new school going up soon. Several Old Country families are expected next spring, and according to reports they all have flocks of youngsters."

"Does Conway hold services in the church?"

"No, the church is an Anglican Mission. An earnest young student conducts evensong once a month to a congregation of eight exiles, four of them Scudamores. Steven is a nonconformist. You might have known."

"I did," admitted Johnny, "but I forgot. I'm not much on remembering the different grades of Christian."

He stayed on the bluff and watched Judith ride down the steep path that led to the flats on which the settlement stood. After her horse had splashed across the shallow creek, she turned in the saddle and waved. Johnny lifted his hat in reply. Then she rode on until the tall cottonwoods that grew thickly around the settlement hid her from sight.

When Johnny reached camp, several hours later, he found Sergeant Laverty of the North-West Mounted Police waiting for him. Laverty had just emerged from the

chuck-tent, where he had been stowing away a generous portion of Cookie's raisin pie. "Hello, Bradford," he said, as Johnny rode up. "I've come for you."

Johnny stiffened. "What do you mean, Lavery?"

Lavery grinned pacifically. "Not what you think. The Superintendent wants to have a talk with you. In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if he wouldn't be above tryin' to persuade you to join the Force."

The tenseness went slowly out of Johnny's body. "Tell the Superintendent that I've made up my mind. I'm stayin' with the Frasers."

Lavery's left eyelid quivered in something like a wink. "I couldn't blame you, Bradford, indeed I couldn't. But I'm only surmisin' what the Superintendent may have in mind. Perhaps it's somethin' else entirely that's distractin' him. You may have fallin' heir to a fortin', or you're maybe a bigamist and the Superintendent has found out about it. But 'twould be doin' only the polite thing to accept his invitation, secin' that I've ridden so far to deliver it. McKelvey says he won't miss you."

"All right, Lavery," said Johnny. "If McKelvey says I can go, I'll be with you as soon as I've had a snack and saddled a fresh horse. But if Cotton thinks he can persuade me to become a constable in an outfit that has made *you* a sergeant then he's goin' to be disappointed."

Lavery grinned cheerfully. "You wouldn't start with bein' anythin' less than a Commissioner," he said. "But I wish you'd get a move on. There's a dance at the fort tonight and if I don't show up the ladies will be destroyed entirely."

Chapter XII

SINCE IT WAS NEARLY MIDNIGHT WHEN THE TWO MEN reached Macleod, Johnny was given lodgings in the barracks for the remainder of the night, and the interview with Superintendent Cotton took place early the following morning. Laverty had been right in his surmise; the Superintendent was anxious to have Johnny join the Force. "Right now we have fewer than five hundred men patrolling the whole of the North-West Territories," he explained. "Until the railroad came through we were able to manage well enough with half the number. But now we have to look after not only the Indians, the whiskey traders and the rustlers, but also the scum that have followed in the track of the railroad. I'd sooner take the job of looking after twenty thousand Indians than five hundred whites of the kind that have been swarming into the Territories this past year or two. I know that many of them are respectable and honest, and will make good settlers, but there are others who have come only for what plunder they can pick up. And that isn't all. Trouble is brewing among the Indians—big trouble. You know about that. And right now we need men badly."

"But I thought that every young buck in the West was keen to join the Force," said Johnny. "That's the impression we got across the line anyway."

"That's more or less true," conceded the Superintendent. "But what we need right now are men who are nine-tenths trained already—men who can ride, men who can shoot, men who know how to handle people, gently

or otherwise as circumstances demand. Conway seems to think you'd make an ideal recruit."

"So Conway's back of this," mused Johnny. "Doesn't he figger there are too many policemen already?"

"In spite of his peculiar private prejudices, Conway has the good of the country at heart. And he knows men."

Johnny was troubled. "I'll tell you how it is, sir. I been knockin' around ever since I was fourteen—all the way from Pecos to Fort Dodge and Abilene, and last year clear up to Montana to say nothin' of places in between. And always—well, for the last five years anyway—I been hankerin' to dig myself in somewhere. But until I crossed the line three weeks ago I never hit the place where I figgered I'd want to settle down as a permanent fixture. Now I've found it. Every time I roll out of my blankets in the mornin' and take a sniff of the air and watch the sun come slidin' across the foothills I say to myself, 'this is it.' And right now I got a good job. I like what I'm doin' and I'm savin' a little dough to add to what I already got. Pretty soon—two-three years mebbe—I'll be able to get a small herd together. Mebbe I won't make much money but I'll be livin' the way I want to live in the place I want to live, and when you can do that, money don't matter. I know I played with the idea of tryin' to join your Force, but I've changed my mind. But I appreciate an awful lot bein' asked. It's just about the finest thing that's ever happened to me."

The Superintendent nodded. "I'm glad you like the country, Bradford," he said. "There's none better. And we can use a few settlers like you." He played idly with a paper-weight, carved from sandstone in the form of an Indian's head, which stood on his desk. "Since you feel as you do, I won't try to persuade you to change your mind, because I know it wouldn't be any use. Instead, I'm going to ask a favour of you—a big favour."

"Shoot, sir," said Johnny.



"You could be a big help to us in two ways, without actually joining the Force. First, I'd like you to keep your eyes and ears open, wherever you are, for leads that might help us to track down the cattle rustlers who have been active around here for the past few months. Four years ago there was hardly a rustler in the Territories—the odd beast stolen now and again, of course, and once in a while the Indians drove a few head across the line. But this is different. Recently the ranchers within this police district --and particularly the Hornby outfit--have lost hundreds of head. And whoever is the brains behind the raids knows a lot about cattle movements in these parts."

"You figger it's a local job, then?"

"I've reached the point where I've just about stopped figuring. I know personally every rancher within a radius of fifty miles, and unless I'm completely at fault in my judgment, every one of them is trustworthy. But their hands drift up from the States and back again. There must be any number of cattlemen and cowboys in Montana who know this country well."

Johnny studied the hatband of his Stetson. "I'll be tickled to do what I can to help," he said. "I've had considerable practice keepin' my eyes and ears open."

"Good. Just one word of advice. In spite of what I've told you, don't trust anyone. Perhaps I don't know people as well as I think."

"I'll remember. And the second job?"

"Is not so likely to be in your line. You've heard of Louis Riel?"

"Sure. He was hangin' around down in the Judith Basin last winter. I heard he did a little schoolteachin' for a while down there. Funny-lookin' little squirt."

"You know him, then?"

"Only to see. I never swapped words with him."

"There are rumours that he's been called north by the Metis to lead them against the proposed Government

redistribution of their lands. If he goes north, trouble is certain. And if the Metis rise, it will be difficult to keep the Indians in check. You see what I'm driving at?"

"That Riel shouldn't go north?"

"Precisely. If he joins Gabriel Dumont and the Metis we daren't touch him without risking instant revolt. But down here—"

"You might be able to do something."

"Perhaps. Riel, if he decides to come, will almost certainly cross into this district. And, for the sake of peace, I'll arrest him if I get the chance. We can easily fix a charge that will hold him for a while. It's vital that he be prevented from reaching Dumont and the Metis."

"It's a tall order," said Johnny. "Just what do you want me to do?"

"Again, all I can ask you to do is to keep your eyes and ears open, as half a dozen other unofficial agents of mine are already doing. Listen to every conversation you chance to hear, drop into settlements like Pilot Creek and Swan Crossing whenever you can. I'll drop a word in Matt Fraser's ear, and he won't work you too hard. It's the slack season now, anyway."

"Well," grinned Johnny, "it's the first time I've ever been asked to be a saloon bum in the line of civic duty. I'll do what I can, sir—on both counts."

They shook hands. "I don't expect you'll learn anything," said Cotton, suddenly pessimistic, "but there's always a chance."

"Sure thing," said Johnny. "Always a chance."

Then he took his leave and rode back over the long prairie trail to the round-up camp on Pilot Creek.

Chapter XIII

AS SOON AS THE ROUND-UP WAS OVER, JOHNNY WENT OUT on the range as line-rider. The work was easy after the strenuous activities of the preceding two weeks. He inspected the Fraser herds, moved one or two of them to richer grazing grounds, chivvied odd strays back to their own ranges, and spent half a day pulling two cows out of a mud-hole. He spent the nights in the open as he had long been accustomed to do. Jess McNulty and Slim Webber remained at home, "chorin' around" the barns and corrals, effecting essential repairs under Matt Fraser's direction. Most cowboys loathed such manual labour, but both McNulty and Webber had been raised on farms and accepted it as a matter of course.

Johnny worked steadily for four days, then, on Saturday night, rode to Macleod to enjoy the luxury of a store haircut and shave. He was back on the range early the following morning. Since the day was Sunday, he spent it loafing comfortably along the banks of Pilot Creek. The water was icy cold, but it was pleasant to take a quick plunge and then relax afterwards in the sun.

Late in the afternoon he was riding along the creek about a mile from the school when he heard someone hail him from the opposite bank. It was Judith Sumner, and she appeared to be in a state of extreme agitation. Johnny returned her hail, and started down the bank intending to cross, but before he reached the bottom, Judith had sent her horse slithering down a steep bluff and was already splashing through the shallow water. Johnny waited for

her under a tall cottonwood. "Anythin' wrong, Judith?" he asked anxiously.

Judith seemed suddenly embarrassed. "Not really, Johnny," she said. "But I'm worried sick. And when I saw you—"

"You figgered you just had to talk. That it?"

"That's it. Let's get off."

They dismounted, and Johnny threw himself at full length on the ground. Judith dropped down beside him. There was a worried look on her face and she slapped restlessly with her riding-quirt at the soft moss around the base of the cottonwood. "I've been looking for Steven Conway. But I couldn't find him."

"Oh?" Johnny's face registered polite interest. "You'd figger he'd be around Sundays."

"Johnny, you've heard of Louis Riel, haven't you?"

Johnny struggled to a sitting position and began to roll a cigarette. "Sure," he said. "We were talkin' about him that night at the Scudamores. Remember? Seems to me he was down in the Judith Basin last winter. I heard—"

"Yes, that's the man," Judith interrupted eagerly. "Did you ever see him?"

"Once or twice."

"Would you know him again if you saw him?"

"Figger mebbe I would. I saw him only once or twice, remember, and, of course, I didn't know then of any call to be scrutinizin' him close, so I didn't pay much attention to him. But I got a good memory for what I see, even in a casual way. Yes, I guess I'd know him."

"Then listen to me," said Judith urgently. "Riel is a very dangerous man. He's not altogether bad—far from it—but he's got a twisted brain. He's come to Canada to lead the Metis in their fight against the Government. He's on his way north now. Johnny, if Riel reaches the

Metis, it means bloodshed—murder! And the Indians will rise if the Metis do."

Judith's words sounded so much like those of Superintendent Cotton that it was on the tip of Johnny's tongue to ask her if she were one of Cotton's unofficial agents. But he thought better of it. "So Riel's in Canada, is he?" he said, still casually.

"Johnny, he's going to be in Pilot Creek tonight!" There was a curious stridency in Judith's voice, as if she were forcing the words out with great effort.

"What do you want me to do about it?" His nerves tingling with excitement, Johnny found it increasingly difficult to maintain the pose of indifference.

Suddenly Judith's body seemed to sag. "I—I don't know," she said, almost listlessly. "Nothing, I suppose. I thought that perhaps—if the police—"

"How do you know Riel is going to be in Pilot Creek tonight?"

"The Stopping House is right alongside Boggs' store. It's supposed to be a grocery store, but Boggs sells whisky in the back room. My bedroom adjoins the second storey. Last night I was hanging dresses in my clothes-cupboard. I heard men talking, and caught a name that sounded like Riel. So I listened."

Johnny did not say anything. He slumped back on the grass and lay supine, eyes half-closed. But he was thinking furiously.

"I caught only snatches of what they were saying. But I heard enough to know that Riel had crossed the border some days ago. And I'm almost sure that they said that tonight he would stop for supplies at Pilot Creek on his way north to Duck Lake. He's on his way to join the Metis. I think Gabriel Dumont is with him."

"Sounds reasonable." Johnny sat up and threw away his half-smoked cigarette. "Did they say where he'd be stoppin' in Pilot Creek?"

"I heard something about the back shed in Boggs' store. Where they keep the whisky."

"What about this man Boggs? Is he in cahoots with Riel?"

"I don't think so. Nobody knows very much about him, except perhaps the police. People say he used to sell whisky to the Indians fifteen years ago, before the police came. But he'd have no interest in helping to stir up trouble. He'll provide Riel and his friends with food and shelter in return for pay--plenty of it--but that's all."

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?" said Johnny for the second time.

"Surely there must be some way of keeping Riel from going north? Think what it will mean if he reaches the Metis."

"Death for a lot of people--mostly Metis," said Johnny sombrely. He got to his feet and brushed a few blades of grass from his trousers. "Judith, I'm goin' to do some hard ridin' between now and dark. Right after it gets dark you can start keepin' an eye peeled for me. I'll come to your rooms and you can give me the lay-out."

She looked at him with mingled hope and apprehension in her eyes. "What are you going to do?"

"Make arrangements to see that Mr. Riel doesn't go north. Judith, it's a desperate game--and I don't think you are a very brave girl. The country is mighty good turn. I hope to see you after sundown."

He mounted his horse and rode in hot haste up the steep bank of the creek. Once on top, he pushed the game little horse to the limit. But it was nearly an hour before he saw what he was looking for--two red-coated horsemen silhouetted against the skyline nearly three miles away.

He fired three quick shots into the air and rode hard in the direction of the patrol. The red-coats turned and rode at top speed to meet him. In a matter of minutes they met on the crest of a little ridge.



"Anything the matter?" said the tall, fair-haired corporal in charge of the patrol, in a voice that not so long before had answered to the roll in a famous English public school.

"I don't know," said Johnny, "but I'm not takin' any chances. There's a rumour that Louis Riel may be stoppin' at Pilot Creek for an hour or two on his way north. I thought mebbe your chief might be interested."



Chapter XIV

AFTER COMMUNICATING WITH THE PATROL, JOHNNY RODE back to Pilot Creek at top speed. By the time he reached the high bluff overlooking the settlement, darkness had fallen. He rode down the steep path to the flats at a more leisurely pace, lest he attract unnecessary attention, and proceeded at a jog trot down the one street of Pilot Creek. Just before he reached the end, he turned off and rode in behind the little Anglican Mission, where he tied Patsy to a convenient tree. He knew that no one would notice the little mare, since it was Sunday evening and there were several saddle-horses and teams tied in the grove of cotton-woods. The livery stable which stood directly across from Boggs' store did little business except in winter.

Johnny strolled the length of the street and back again. There were only half a dozen buildings on either side along the entire length, and it did not take him long. Then in the same leisurely fashion he crossed over to the Stopping House and went inside. The Stopping House had been built years before as part of a police post which had subsequently been abandoned. The building had been completed by the trader Boggs, and then sold to an Englishman named Prothero. It was an unusually substantial, well-constructed hostel. In front there was a large waiting-room and lobby, sparsely furnished and rarely occupied, except when a few cowboys gathered around the small, oilcloth-covered table in the centre of the room for a mild flurry at poker. But the Protheros prided themselves on keeping a respectable house, and big games were held in the room at the back of Boggs' store. The dining-room



adjoined the lobby. It, too, was sparsely furnished, with a single long table flanked by home-made benches running down the centre. The remainder of the ground floor was given over to the Protheros' private rooms, which ran all the way across the back.

After a hurried glance around the lobby, Johnny walked up the stairs to the second floor. A wide hall ran the length of the floor. On one side were several rooms for transient guests; on the other, Judith Sumner's apartment. A small, neat card bearing her name was fastened to the door of her living-room. Johnny knocked, and Judith's voice bade him enter.

The living-room was large, and comfortably furnished in admirable taste. Ornate wall-paper was the fashion of the day, but the walls of Judith Sumner's living-room were distempered a delicate cream. There was an Oriental rug on the floor, and two or three deep armchairs. A piano stood against the far wall. Judith was sitting in an arm-chair by the window. As Johnny entered she rose to her feet and hurried to meet him. "Johnny, I'm glad you've come," she said, holding out her hand. "I've been so nervous. But you're alone?" Her hand was hot and moist and there was an unusual flush in her cheeks. She was wearing a white dress of some soft material, with a red flower in her hair.

"Yes, I'm alone. If Riel is comin' we've got to avoid givin' him the impression that there's a reception committee waitin' for him. I'll get word out after I make sure he's here. Any sign of him?"

"I don't know. I saw some men go into the back room of the store just at dusk. But I couldn't see who they were. Anyway, I wouldn't know Riel. But there's something in the wind. I can feel it!"

Johnny frowned. "It's goin' to be mighty hard to see anybody from now on," he said. "Moon's up, but you can't identify people very well in the moonlight. Mebbe

I'd better do a little explorin'. Where's this clothes-cupboard of yours?"

"Oh, but there's no use your going in there," she said. "I'm positive that there's no one in the room adjoining."

"If you don't mind, Judith," said Johnny with gentle insistence, "I'd like to get the lay of the land. If they were layin' plans in that room like you told me, they may be bringin' Riel there later in the evenin'. Of course, it's your cupboard. Only I figger mebbe it's important."

"Well, I'm sure you won't hear anything. But I suppose you're perfectly right." Judith led the way into her bedroom. Like the living-room, it was furnished in excellent taste. With obvious reluctance she opened the door of the clothes-cupboard, revealing a long row of dresses and assorted articles of feminine attire.

"Gosh," said Johnny, taken aback. "Do I have to wade through all that raiment just to do a little caves-droppin'?"

"I'm afraid so," said Judith. "I did my best to discourage you, didn't I?" She gathered an armful of dresses off the hooks and piled them on the bed. "Maybe that will help."

"Thanks." Johnny advanced cautiously into the cupboard, which extended a surprisingly long way back. It was filled with the delicate scent of lavender. For a minute or two he poked about in the corners, tapping the wall here and there with his knuckles. Then he returned to the bedroom and closed the cupboard door behind him. "You must have awful good ears, Judith," he said. "Seems to me that the logs in that wall must be about two feet thick."

"I expect there are a lot of chinks between them," suggested Judith helpfully.

"Must be," said Johnny. But there was not much conviction in his voice.

They returned to the living-room. "Mind if I put out the light?" said Johnny.



"No," said Judith. "But why?"

Johnny blew out the lamp which stood on the table in the centre of the room. "I want to look out of the window," he explained. "Folks might wonder if they saw a man up here."

He went to the big living-room window which overlooked the street and drew the heavy curtains aside. There were a few pedestrians strolling down the middle of the street, probably on their way home from the church service. But there was not a horseman in sight. The moon had risen well above the bluffs and the settlement was etched in silver. "It's a right pretty sight," said Johnny, half to himself.

Judith came and stood beside him. Johnny caught a whiff of the perfume she was wearing—delicate, tantalizing. "Johnny," she said, "I don't know what your plans are, but I'm so terrified that he'll get away. Isn't there any way of finding out, now—" She broke off suddenly.

Johnny completed the sentence for her. "If Riel is really in that back room of Boggs' store? Mebbe there is. I can always go down and take a look."

"But Johnny—the danger!"

"No danger at all. Riel and his buddies will do just about anything to avoid trouble right now. The last thing they'd dream of doin' would be to damage a citizen whose only offence was curiosity. All I'm afraid of is that he might get wise to the fact that someone was takin' a mighty big interest in his movements and vamoose before we're ready for him. But I guess I got to take a chance."

"There's a wooden fire-escape leading from my bedroom window," said Judith. "It takes you right into the lane that runs behind the buildings on this street. If you went down it you could slip along the lane to the store—"

But Johnny shook his head. "If I go out the front door no one will notice. But if anyone spotted me goin' down the fire-escape there would be a right pretty scandal

that would keep the ladies entertained for the next six months. I figger I'd better stick to the usual exit channels."

He picked up his hat from the living-room table, opened the door and stepped out into the hall. As he reached the head of the stairs he was engulfed in a tide of babbling femininity that surged upwards and around him. "Why, it's Mr. Bradford!" cried Jane Scudamore, supplementing her sister Lucy's shrill ejaculations of surprise and delight. Mrs. Scudamore, who was bringing up the rear, added her salutations.

"You've been paying a little social call, I see," said Lucy sweetly. "Judith's a jolly good sort, isn't she? So friendly. *Everyone* calls on her—at all hours."

Johnny kept his temper. "She's a real nice girl," he agreed ingenuously. "I knew she must be, seein' I met her at your place."

"Of course, of course," said Mrs. Scudamore vaguely. "*That's* where I met you, isn't it, Mr. Bradford? What a small world." Then her face suddenly brightened. "A delightful sermon, didn't you think, Mr. Bradford? Really delightful. But I was forgetting—you're a nonconformist, aren't you—like dear Mr. Conway? So, of course, you didn't hear the sermon. Such a pity. But I do hope we'll see you again very soon."

She held out her hand, and the Scudamore procession swept on its way. Johnny, struggling between indignation and mirth, went downstairs. The Scudamores had no doubt driven in by buckboard to attend evensong, and were spending the night at the Stopping House. He wondered idly where the Major was. It was unfortunate that the girls had seen him coming out of Judith Sumner's apartment, but the circumstance was of no immediate importance. Dismissing it from his mind, he stepped out into the street.



Chapter XV

HE STOOD FOR A MINUTE OR TWO LEANING AGAINST THE wall beside the door, fingers hooked into his belt, whistling a few tuneless bars between his teeth. He looked up at the moon, yawned elaborately, and then moved off past the darkened front of Boggs' general store. Just beyond the store the street merged with the flatlands of the creek. Willows grew thickly thereabouts, close to the store. Johnny melted as quietly as possible into the willows, then worked his way cautiously towards the back of the store. Presently he peered out from behind his protective screen to find that he had a clear view of the back lane—no more than a deeply rutted trail—which ran behind the buildings for the full length of the street. There was no one in sight, but several saddle-horses were hitched to a rail directly behind the store. From a small window at the back of the store a light shone dimly—so dimly as to suggest that the window was covered by more than ordinary curtains.

Johnny emerged from the shelter of the willows. For a moment he was in clear view of anyone who might be looking in his direction, but it was a risk that he had to take. Then he slipped into the shadow of the store. The moonlight did not fall behind the building, and the darkness was intense. The ground underfoot was soft, and Johnny's high-heeled boots made no sound. Presently he dropped to his hands and knees, took off his hat and crawled forward until he was directly beneath the window. Then he raised his head until he was able to look over the sill.

A blanket had been nailed over the window on the inside. But from one corner the nail had apparently fallen out, and the blanket had dropped back, leaving a tiny strip of pane uncovered. Through this narrow strip Johnny was able to see into a corner of the room. A man was sitting in a chair beside a rough board table. There was food on the table in front of him, but he appeared to be talking rather than eating. Johnny could catch no more than a faint murmur of words, although the man appeared to be talking with vehemence. Suddenly he stood up, hands outstretched. He was a small man, sallow-faced, with a shock of straight black hair that fell low over his forehead. His dark eyes were inordinately brilliant. Then, just as abruptly, he shrugged his shoulders, dropped back into his chair and, drawing a dish towards him, began to eat voraciously.

Johnny turned and crept back the way he had come. As soon as he reached the street he again assumed the easy nonchalance of the casual stroller. But the moment Judith admitted him to her room his demeanour changed. "You were right, Judith," he said tensely. "Riel is here! Now, I'm going. Cotton will have patrols posted all around the settlement by this time. I'll give them the word."

Judith ran to him in the darkness. "Don't take any chances, Johnny," she cried. "But *please* don't let him get away. And hurry—hurry!"

"He won't get away providin' the police can think up a few charges against him so they can hold him," he said, "and I figger we can trust Cotton for that." He spoke with studied calmness, for it was clear that Judith was in a state bordering on hysteria. It almost seemed as if she had a personal stake in the arrest of Riel.

Johnny went to the window for a final observation before going down and riding away to find Corporal Simmons at the group of trees known as the Seven Cottonwoods, where he had arranged to meet him. Judith came and

stood beside him. "Look—look!" she cried, and this time there was no mistaking the hysteria in her voice.

Two horsemen had appeared from somewhere along the river flats and were riding slowly down the street. "I see," said Johnny, "but I don't figger we need to get excited. They got nothin' to do with us."

He turned away, but Judith caught him by the arm in a grip unexpectedly strong. "Don't go!" she cried. "Johnny—don't go!"

Johnny disengaged his arm. Then he looked out again. The two horsemen had reached the end of the street. Their faces were in shadow or else concealed behind bandana handkerchiefs. One of the riders was small and slightly built. The other was a big man, and he was riding a black horse. As Johnny watched, they swung across the street and out of sight behind Boggs' store.

"Judith, do you know these men?" Johnny shot the question out almost fiercely.

Judith recoiled with an audible gasp. "No—no—but I'm afraid. Johnny, don't go—please, don't go!"

For a second time he found it necessary to break her grip on his arm. "Listen, Judith," he said, "better pull yourself together. I don't have to go near those birds. Patsy's in the grove behind the preachin' house. I can walk out of here, down the street and keep on goin' clear to the crick, then circle around through the bushes and nobody'll lay eyes on me. It's a cinch."

He went slowly downstairs, and as before leaned for a minute or two against the wall before continuing on his way. This time, however, he went in the direction opposite to the one he had taken before. He reached the creek, crept along its edge through the willows, then circled back towards the grove of trees behind the Mission. He reached the edge of the grove where he had tied Patsy and breathed more easily. It seemed unlikely that anyone would have spotted him.

Safe within the grove, he moved more quickly. Already nearly quarter of an hour had passed since he left the Stopping House, and every minute was important. Suddenly, with a muttered ejaculation, he pulled up short. In front of him was the tree to which he had tied Patsy. He was sure, because of the sawed-off branch about six feet above the ground.

But Patsy was no longer there.

Chapter XVI

FOR A FEW SECONDS JOHNNY ALLOWED HIMSELF TO THINK that Patsy had broken loose and wandered off somewhere in search of green grass, but he quickly abandoned the theory. Knots tied as he tied them didn't come undone of themselves, and had Patsy broken the rope with a quick jerk of her head there would have been a piece of it still fastened to the tree. Someone, then, had deliberately untied his saddle-horse. A horse-thief? A practical joker? A mischievous small boy bent on excitement? Or someone interested in seeing that Johnny did not leave the settlement? He wasted no time weighing the various possibilities which ran through his mind. If Riel were to be stopped from going north, immediate action was imperative.

Johnny returned as he had come, through the willows along the bank of the creek, and on up the street to the Stopping House. But instead of going in, he continued on past Boggs' store and around behind it to the hitching-post where several saddle-horses were pawing restlessly at the ground. Without hesitation he began to unfasten the black stallion's halter rope. But the beast plunged back, teeth bared, and Johnny let go the rope in a flash. He was not afraid of any horse on earth, but this was no time to fight a furious stallion. Quickly he untied the horse next in line, a tractable, raw-boned grey gelding, and swung into the saddle. The stirrups were much too short but he did not wait to lengthen them. He rode off at a gallop, expecting every minute to hear shouts, and perhaps the crack of a rifle behind him.

But nothing happened. Apparently no one had seen



him take the grey. At the base of the bluff, well within the shelter of the tree-belt, he breathed more easily. He had a good horse under him, he was almost out of range of Boggs' store, and Corporal Simmons was waiting only three miles away at the Seven Cottonwoods. In less than half an hour the cordon would close in for the capture. The arrest should be easy. Riel would be smart enough, from all that Johnny had heard, not to resist.

The grey tackled the steep trail up the side of the bluff with a will. Johnny had a momentary twinge of apprehension as he emerged from the belt of cottonwoods, which extended for only a short distance up the side of the bluff. He was out in the open now, and the grey horse would be clearly visible in the moonlight to anyone in the settlement, less than three hundred yards away. He looked back over his shoulder. All seemed quiet. No lights showed anywhere in the settlement except in the Mission and from one or two of the upstairs rooms in the Stopping House, no doubt those occupied by the Scudamores. Judith Sumner's rooms were still in darkness.

Johnny reached the top of the bluff. The plain stretched out before him, with the great, swelling curves of the foothills beyond, those nearest at hand clearly outlined in the moonlight, those farther away blending almost imperceptibly with the sky. There was no sound on the night air except the howl of a lonely coyote, which went unanswered and died trembling away into silence.

He swung the grey into the buffalo trail that led across the prairie to the Seven Cottonwoods, where Simmons was waiting. Then a streak of flame stabbed from a clump of bushes at the edge of the bluff, less than thirty yards away, and the night was filled with the crash of an exploding bullet. The grey gave a convulsive, terrified leap forward, his forelegs buckled under him, and with a strangled cough he lurched to the ground. Johnny shook his feet free of the stirrups and leaped clear of the falling horse. Crouched

low, he ran back to the edge of the bluff and plunged headlong over. He rolled down the path for some distance before he was able to check his descent. Then he lurched to his feet, dived off the path into the grass and weeds that grew thickly alongside, and slid or scrambled down until he reached the belt of cottonwoods.

Straining eyes and ears, he remained where he was for nearly half an hour. But he saw nothing, heard nothing. At length he struck out slowly along the base of the bluff, keeping within the shadow of the cottonwoods, until he reached a point where the bluffs curved in close to the settlement. Then, not without an empty sensation in the pit of his stomach, he left the shelter of the trees and hurried to the Stopping House. There were lights on now in Judith Sumner's rooms, and he walked boldly up the stairs and knocked on the door.

There was no answer. He knocked again, louder this time. Then he heard the click of high-heeled shoes moving across the floor, and the door opened. "Johnny—you're back so soon!"

He stepped inside the door. Judith was getting ready for bed. She wore a dressing-gown, and her hair hung down her back in a thick braid.

"Yes, Judith, I'm back."

She looked at him with fear in her eyes. "I—I heard a shot. Was it—"

"Somebody tried to kill me."

"Oh, no—not that!" She came close to him, and he saw that she was trembling violently. "It's my fault, Johnny. I shouldn't have persuaded you."

"It's all right, Judith—never touched me. But he got my horse."

"Patsy?"

"No. Somebody turned Patsy loose, so I borrowed a nag from behind Boggs' store. I guess I won't be able to return him now. You haven't seen or heard anything?"

"Nothing except the shot. I thought I might as well go to bed. I wasn't expecting you back."

Johnny looked at her steadily. "You weren't goin' to wait up to see if the Mounties nabbed Riel?"

Judith laughed a little uncertainly. "I thought it would be hours before you got back. And since my bedroom window opens out on the lane, I knew I'd hear any disturbance. But anyway, I don't think I'd like to see a man arrested. Not even Riel."

Johnny ignored her concluding remark. "That's right. Your bedroom window does look out on the lane at the back." He turned quickly and strode to the bedroom door.

"Johnny—don't go in there!"

He stopped, puzzled, his hand on the door-knob. "I'd just like to see if there's any sign of life back of the store. Seems like it's about time the boys were movin'."

She hurried to his side. "It—it's just that things are a bit untidy," she explained. "I was undressing when I heard your knock."

"Oh, well, that doesn't matter much, does it? But, of course, if you're goin' to be embarrassed, I guess I can go down and do some investigatin' from the willows, where I was before."

"No, no—it's perfectly all right." She opened the bedroom door and slipped in ahead of him. The room was in darkness, save for the light that streamed in through the open doorway from the lamp on the table in the living-room. The light fell directly on the bed, which was strewn with a profusion of garments. Judith gathered up the clothes and carried them to the cupboard. Johnny went to the window and looked out.

There was movement down below, and men were emerging from the back of Boggs' store. Johnny counted seven in all. They moved with a silent purposefulness that betokened action. Then six men mounted and rode off, the leader astride the black stallion. The seventh man

remained outside the store for a minute or two, looking after the vanishing riders. Perhaps, Johnny reflected, he was the owner of the dead grey. Presently the man re-entered the store, and slammed the rear door shut behind him. A sound of horses' hoofs splashing through water came from the direction of the creek. Then all was quiet. Riel had ridden north.

Johnny turned to Judith, who was standing at his shoulder. "Well," he said, "he's gone. Sorry I let you down."

"It doesn't matter," said Judith listlessly. Then suddenly she burst into tears.

Johnny was embarrassed. "You've had a tough night, Judith," he said with awkward sympathy. "Guess I'd better be goin' now. You try to get a good sleep."

Judith smiled wanly through her tears. "It *has* been a hard night," she agreed. "Sorry to go all weepy on you like this. If you don't find Patsy you'd better take Jupiter. I'll slip down now and tell Mr. Prothero to let you into the stable."

But Johnny did not need to borrow Jupiter. After a few minutes' search he found Patsy in the shed behind the Mission. It almost seemed as if someone had moved her with no other motive in mind than to put her where a horse properly belonged.

Johnny rode away at last, this time following the creek for a mile or more before venturing to scale the bluff to the top. Then he rode off to communicate with Corporal Simmons, although he knew that there was now no chance of intercepting Riel. As he rode, he wondered about many things. But, above all else, he wondered why a long black cloak had been lying across Judith Sumner's bed, and why the bottom of the white dress which lay beside the cloak was damp and mud-stained, as if it had dragged through the dew-wet grass but a short time before.

Chapter XVII

THE NEXT MORNING JOHNNY RODE INTO MACLEOD. He was angry and disappointed to have to report failure, but his annoyance was somewhat relieved by Cotton's affability. "Yes," he said, before Johnny had time to do more than acknowledge the other's "good-morning," "I heard all about it from Simmons hours ago. Too bad, Bradford - it was a mighty close thing. But perhaps it will be just as well in the long run that we missed. We'd have had difficulty holding Riel for any length of time, and even if we had been able to lock him up, the Indians might have become restless. As things stand, it's just possible that the trouble may be localized up north."

It seemed to Johnny that the Superintendent was secretly relieved that the coup had failed. "Mebbe so," he said. "All the same, I don't much like being shot at."

"We're investigating the shooting," said Cotton. "It's a serious matter. But I'm afraid there isn't much chance of finding out anything about it. I think you can be sure that whoever fired at you has ridden north with Riel."

Johnny made no comment. He briefly considered the advisability of telling Cotton about the man on the black stallion. He was sure he was the rustler who had ridden him down the night of the raid. But he could not help feeling a little sore over the Superintendent's casual attitude towards the events of the preceding evening, so he decided to keep his own counsel.

He took his leave as soon as possible and rode back to



the range. On the way he thought a good deal about Judith Sumner. He was sure that, almost immediately after he had left her, she had slipped out of her room by way of the fire-escape. Had she moved his horse? Certainly she would have had plenty of time, while he was crawling along through the trees at the edge of the creek. But, after all, it was she who had persuaded him to try to stop Riel, she who had given him every assistance and encouragement until the very last minute when her nerve had obviously failed her. Or had it? Either way, nothing seemed to make sense. On the surface, her behaviour was at best irresponsible and contradictory. But Judith Sumner was not an irresponsible woman. Johnny pondered the problem all day and half the night, then gave it up. The next morning, his work completed, he rode back to the ranch house, determined to forget all about the affair at Pilot Creek. Now that Riel had gone north, it didn't matter any longer.

But he soon found that he was not to be allowed to forget. The reminder came from a totally unexpected quarter. He reached the ranch in the middle of the afternoon, and almost immediately went down to the big corral adjoining the barns to look over some three-year-old horses with a view to selecting one or two for his own use. He was sitting on the top rail of the corral, smoking a cigarette and enjoying the luxury of a leisurely half-hour, when Linda Fraser appeared.

"Hello," he said, looking admiringly down at the trim figure in a well-cut blue-and-white-checked gingham frock, "I'm mighty glad to see you, Linda. You weren't around when I reported to your dad."

"No, I wasn't." She put a foot tentatively on the bottom rail, then, when Johnny reached down a hand to help her, appeared to change her mind. "Thank you," she said. "I'll stay here."

"Then I'll come down." He dropped easily from the top rail and stood beside her. She was looking at the horses in the corral, and her lips were set in an unexpectedly straight line.

"Everythin' all right around the ranch?" he asked.

"Yes, thanks." She was now looking into some remote distance. "You found everything all right on the range?"

"Couldn't be better. All the stock lookin' fine."

There followed a long, strained silence. "And Judith Sumner—she's quite well, too?"

"Why, yes, I—"

Then the truth dawned. "I suppose the Scudamore gals didn't lose any time gettin' over to see you?" he said.

"They merely happened to stop in for lunch yesterday morning on their way home from Pilot Creek."

"Sure. Just by accident-like. Only took them ten miles out of their way. And no doubt they just happened to mention our meetin' night before last?"

"They did make some casual reference to it. Not that it matters in the least." A dainty toe stirred up a small cloud of dust, but Linda's eyes were still fixed on the far-off hills.

"Judith sent for me," said Johnny. "It was important." He was suddenly very angry. For there was no possible way of explaining why he had gone to see Judith in her rooms long after dark, unless he told the truth. And for a number of reasons the truth could not be told.

The toe moved more rapidly and the dust-cloud increased in size. "It must have been *very* important. Ten o'clock at night—"

"Linda," said Johnny quietly, "I don't like to hear you talkin' that way."

The girl flushed scarlet. "Johnny, I—I—Oh, I *am* a cat!" She turned, and, skirts flying, fled back along the path to the house. Johnny looked after her in amazement.

"Well, if that don't beat all!" he ejaculated, as the door slammed shut behind her. For the rest of the afternoon he alternately tried out prospective saddle-horses and puzzled over the ways of women. They were, he concluded, inexplicable.

Nor did he have occasion to change his opinion later in the evening, when, having first made sure that Matt Fraser was out of the way, he dropped in at the ranch house, ostensibly to borrow a darning needle. He accepted Linda's invitation to sit down.

"Linda," he said, "I been wonderin'."

"Wondering what, Johnny?" She was sitting close to the big lamp and sewing on a garment that appeared to be a mass of lace and ribbon.

"Wonderin' why you got so sort of worked up because I'd seen Judith amner?"

Linda held up the garment and looked at it with a critical eye. "How do you like my new petticoat?" she demanded.

Johnny blushed. "Looks real nice," he said. "Prettiest one I ever saw."

"Have you seen many?" Her blue eyes laughed at his embarrassment.

"Shucks, Linda, you --I-- But, anyway, to get back to what I was sayin'."

"Johnny," she said gravely, "you remember when I let you out of the shed?"

"Yes?"

"And you remember what I said to you when you asked me why I did it?"

A dull flush mounted in Johnny's cheeks. He did not reply.

"You know how I feel towards you, don't you, Johnny?"

"Yeah—maternal." He forced the words out between his teeth.

"Well, then, Johnny, how do you think a mother would

feel if she heard that her little boy had been visiting a woman—a woman of the world—in her rooms, late at night—”

Johnny snatched up his hat and made for the door. A trill of gay laughter pursued him all the way to the bunk-house. He spent the rest of the evening playing solitaire and muttering to himself in a low voice. It was one of the worst evenings he had ever spent in his life.

Chapter XVIII

THE BRIEF, GLORIOUS SPRING RAN ITS COURSE AND MERGED with summer—hot, dry, relieved only by occasional heavy thunderstorms that gathered suddenly in the mountains and swept down the watercourses, spreading out into the plains beyond. The brilliant, post-card green of the foothills and prairies turned—slowly at first, then almost overnight—to grey-brown, and the dust rose and fell in great clouds whenever anything moved along the twisting trails. But no matter how fiercely the sun blazed down at noonday, the nights were almost invariably cool, the air of a velvety softness, the stars of incredible splendour.

For the ranchman, the midsummer days were days of comparative idleness. There was plenty of riding to be done, but no strenuous manual work, only the business of drifting herds from one grazing ground to another, and seeing to it that they did not suffer from lack of water. The smaller creeks dried up early in July, but there was always water in the Old Man's and Belly rivers and most of their numerous tributaries.

In September came the fall beef round-up, and once again there were long days of hard riding, and nights of dreamless sleep under the stars. But there was a nip in the air now, and in the mornings the ground was often covered with hoar-frost. The first blizzard struck towards the end of October. The snow promptly melted under the blasts of a warm Chinook. In the weeks and months that followed, Johnny was to witness many times the extraordinary phenomenon of the Chinook—deep snow and bitter cold one day, the next a strong, warm—almost hot—

wind blowing across the plains from the mountains, the snow melting away before it with unbelievable rapidity, the water cascading in rivulets and torrents down the creek beds. Almost overnight the grass would appear, assuring excellent grazing until next snowfall. Only rarely did the snow stay long enough to occasion any real hardship to the herds. The Chinook made the belt of territory in the shadow of the Rockies ideal wintering country for stock.

Christmas came and went, with a round of parties at various ranch houses and in the settlements. The Mounted Police New Year's Party in Fort Macleod, to which every rancher and cowboy for fifty miles around was invited, marked the climax of the season's festivities. The party began at six o'clock on New Year's Eve when the guests, nearly two hundred in number, sat down to dinner in the mess-hall of the Fort; it continued, with scarcely time out for sleep, for the following twenty-four hours. This was the occasion on which the Force returned the hospitality which had been accorded its members all the year round by the settlers of the district, and nothing was left undone that might contribute to its hilarity. Anything following the Fort Macleod party was inevitably in the nature of an anti-climax, and consequently there was little thereafter in the way of social activity until well on in February. This second round of festivity reached its climax in the Pilot Creek Box Social, Concert and Dance, held just before the spring break-up.

The dance, organized by half a dozen energetic ladies of the settlement, under the leadership of Judith Sumner, was ostensibly for the purpose of raising funds towards the building of a community hospital. There was no doctor nearer than Fort Macleod, and in wintertime he was so busy that it was almost impossible to secure his services except in cases of desperate emergency. It was Judith Sumner who had conceived the idea of a small hospital

for the settlement, and she was a tireless worker on behalf of the project.

The week preceding the dance was one of intense cold; then the weather changed overnight and the next day the snow fell from a liver-coloured sky and blew across the prairies in whirling clouds to bank up in great drifts in the coulees and along the fences. The Willing Workers, as the sponsors called themselves, looked at the skies and despaired; there was talk of postponing the entertainment for a week or ten days, but the impossibility of letting all prospective guests know of the change made the suggestion impracticable. So the Willing Workers accepted the inevitable and set valiantly to work decorating the vast waiting-room of the Stopping House where the dance was to be held. The entire ground floor—the lobby and waiting-room, the dining-room and the Protheros' private apartments—was requisitioned; and upstairs, Judith Sumner's rooms were set apart for the use of the ladies. In a single afternoon the dreary waiting-room was transformed into as near an approximation of fairyland as the limited resources of the committee made possible. The ceiling was gay with streamers, richly coloured paper borders ran around the walls and windows, evergreen arches appeared in the most unexpected places; and Miss Libby Peters made a mighty horseshoe bearing the legend "Welcome to Pilot Creek" out of birch-wood, tissue-paper, coloured ribbons and tinfoil. The horseshoe occupied the place of honour over the door of the waiting-room. Miss Libby was a faded little spinster who had come out years before from "down east" to keep house for her brother, Seth Peters, who ran a combined dry-goods store and lumber-yard in Pilot Creek. Miss Libby was a tower of strength to the Willing Workers. Her ideas were usually impracticable, but her enthusiasm was unbounded.

The dining-room was converted into a "sitting-out" room, one of Judith Sumner's innovations of the previous

year, and viewed with grave suspicion by many of the older generation. From various sources the members of the committee mustered no less than three horse-hair sofas and six arm-chairs. Folding camp-beds, when placed against the walls and covered with Indian blankets, made effective love-seats. Miss Libby coyly suggested that the big oil lamp which hung suspended by a chain from the ceiling might be left unlit, and candles placed at intervals around the room, but her suggestion was sternly vetoed by Mrs. Henry Willis, a dour matron of strong principles, whose husband, a mousy little New Englander, ran the livery and feed stable. "There'll be nothin' done in the way of fixin's at this dance that'll make it easier for them that's inclined to get into trouble to get into it," she said, with a decisive shake of her ostrich plumes. Judith Sumner smiled a tired smile and ruled Miss Libby's suggestion interesting but inappropriate.

Two days before the dance the skies again darkened; by six o'clock in the evening the wind was still rising and the thermometer hovered around thirty degrees below zero. Two hours later the Chinook came surging over the mountains, driving the snow in clouds before it, and the temperature began to soar. Next morning the water was pouring down the street and patches of grass were beginning to appear on the slopes of the hills. The day of the dance the wind still blew, and the prairies lay brown and bare beneath the soft grey sky. The wind was no longer blowing a gale, but it was still warm, and from some high places the dust was whirling. The Willing Workers greeted each other with delighted smiles. Mrs. Willis even went so far as to attribute the Chinook to a direct intervention of Providence.

From eight in the morning on, one or more of the committee were in constant attendance at the Stopping House, adding numerous last-minute touches, making arrangements for the boiling of the coffee in great pots,

seeing that adequate supplies of thick, earthenware crockery—most of it borrowed from the Protheros—were available. And from somewhere among her treasures Libby Peters produced a wreath of wax immortelles which she hung over the door of the sitting-out room. She had bought the wreath long ago to put on the grave of a dear friend; but the friend had unexpectedly recovered. Libby was glad that she had at last found use for it. And perhaps it could be used for its original purpose later on.

Chapter XIX

THE ENTERTAINMENT WAS ANNOUNCED TO BEGIN AT eight o'clock. At six-thirty the first buckboard load of guests arrived. It included Mr. and Mrs. Berkslund, their three husky, teen-aged daughters, celebrated throughout the countryside for their phenomenal endurance on the dance floor, and Mrs. Berkslund's mother, aged eighty-six. Thereafter a steady stream of "rigs" poured down the narrow trails on either side of the creek--those coming from the north had to ford the stream in flood--and deposited their loads at the Stopping House door. From every point of the compass they gathered, from distances up to fifty miles or more, by buckboard, buggy, wagon, on foot and on horseback. Long before eight o'clock extra benches had been rushed from the Anglican Mission to the "auditorium," as Miss Libby Peters insisted on calling the Stopping House waiting-room, and men were standing three deep at the back. The only untoward incident occurred when Miss Libby's "Welcome" horseshoe broke from its moorings and knocked out an unfortunate cow-puncher from the Bar Five ranch. However, he regained consciousness shortly afterwards, and the disturbance which the accident had created quickly subsided.

Johnny Bradford and Linda Fraser rode over together from the Fraser ranch. Matt Fraser was suffering from a knee injury which he had sustained when a horse, only half-broken, had brushed him against the rails of the corral. "Anyway," he said, "I'm gettin' too old to be up all night. Away ye go and enjoy yoursel's."

Johnny carried a large bag containing Linda's party



outfit. She herself carried, in a smaller bag, the carefully prepared and guarded box of food which, along with numerous others, would be auctioned off after the concert, the purchaser of the box enjoying the privilege of having supper with its owner. It was a convention governing the institution of the box-social that there should be no marks of identification on the boxes; the purchaser theoretically did not know whether he was spending his hard-earned money in order to eat supper with the maiden of his heart's desire or with some grandmotherly soul of eighty. In practice, however, either by some subtle form of telepathy or by downright broad hints a girl was usually able to indicate to the man of her choice when to start bidding.

During the ride from the ranch to Pilot Creek, Johnny had made one or two attempts to secure advance information from Linda, but had been firmly rebuffed. "I shall take whomsoever the gods send me," she said. "It might be you, of course, but--"

"And it might be old man Walker or Joe Boggs," growled Johnny. "Honest, Linda, if you still have that maternal feelin' towards me you'll want to see me well fed, won't you?"

Linda clucked thoughtfully. Then she flashed him a smile. "Well, maybe," she admitted. "We'll see." And with the vague promise of possible relenting, Johnny had to be content.

They stabled their horses in the shed behind the Anglican Mission, where some of the overflow from the livery stable was being accommodated, and went at once to the Stopping House. There they separated, and from then until after the concert Johnny caught only fleeting glimpses of Linda, who was busy helping the Willing Workers. He himself was quickly wedged into a corner, between old man Walker and a puncher from the Lazy U. Old man Walker chewed tobacco continually; every two minutes his head turned with clock-like precision towards

the open window behind him. He lived in a constant draft, which may have accounted for the perpetual drop of moisture which shone on the end of his nose.

At eight-fifteen the curtains—several Pilot Creek bed-sheets fastened together with safety-pins—parted, revealing Judith Sumner's little flock—six small girls and four small boys—shy and uncomfortable in stiffly starched frocks and unnaturally confining collars, arranged in a limp semicircle on a platform constructed of several heavy planks laid along a number of upturned empty molasses kegs. Miss Libby Peters was at the organ—borrowed from the Anglican Mission—and the children, in response to a wheezy chord, burst into the song of welcome which Miss Libby had herself composed:

"Welcome to our friends so dear,
We are glad that you are here;
May your worries fade away
And all this night be bright and gay."

And so on through twelve stanzas of similar quality and sentiment.

The response of the audience was loud and sincere. Then Mr. Bate, the Anglican Mission student, an earnest young man fresh from the east, gave a reading. His choice was perhaps unfortunate—a poem by the poet laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson. This time the applause, in old man Walker's phrase, was "polite but not awful enthusiastic." Next Mr. Prothero, resplendent in a loud check suit across the waistcoat of which shone magnificently a mighty yardage of gold watch-chain hung with innumerable fobs and mystic charms, obliged with two vocal numbers, "Nut-Brown Maiden" and "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep." The applause increased ten-fold when, just as Mr. Prothero was taking his bows, one of the planks slipped and the artist disappeared from view among the molasses barrels. He was extricated by Mr. Bate and as many of



the audience in the front row as could crowd onto the platform. As soon as the planks had been replaced, Mr. Prothero took another bow, and brought down the house with a rendition of "The Night that Father Fell Downstairs." After he had made his exit, the juvenile chorus came on again with a number about the snows of winter being followed by the flowers of spring. Music by Mendelssohn, words by Miss Libby Peters.

But the *pièce de résistance* was the duet, "The Gypsy's Warning," sung in costume by Miss Libby and Mr. Prothero. They were called back twice, responding with two selections, "It Was a Lover and His Lass," and a daring little number entitled "Will You Spark in the Park After Dark, Pretty Maiden?" during which Mr. Prothero made terrific play with eyes and moustaches, and Miss Libby responded with coy excursions and retreats. Afterwards, flushed and triumphant, she resumed her place at the organ—temporarily relinquished to Judith Sumner—and the entire cast appeared on the platform to lead the audience in the grand finale, a sing-song.

After "God Save the Queen" had been sung and the rafters had ceased to rattle, the platform was quickly cleared away and, amid a rising babble of conversation from all parts of the hall, interrupted by the shrill squeals of a score or more of excited children, preparations were begun for the auctioning off of the food boxes. Most of the men in the audience, Johnny included, took advantage of the break to slip outside for a breath of fresh air or a smoke. Meanwhile the Willing Workers, under the direction of Mr. Prothero and Mr. Bate, arranged the boxes of food on a table in front of the hall. When all was in readiness, the word was passed among the men, and they surged back into the hall in a body. As he re-entered, Johnny saw Linda, gay in her sky-blue party frock, hurrying up to the table, a swirl of white-lace petticoat showing above her trim ankles. She was carrying a box under her arm, a box



ornate with ribbon and tissue-paper, and as she passed she turned and smiled significantly. Johnny grinned back in perfect understanding. There was no possibility of mistaking the box, because of the series of little silver hearts which formed a border all around the top.

As soon as the audience had settled into a semblance of order, Mr. Prothero mounted a small wooden bench that had been placed alongside the table and called for silence. He was rewarded by a mighty roar, followed by an expectant hush. Then he picked up the first box from the top of the great heap and held it high above his head. "What am I hofferred, gents?" he demanded. "Look at it—just look at it! Lovingly fashioned—hadorned with all the graces of its creator—filled to the brim with goodies moulded by 'er own fair 'ands! A lucky man 'e is 'oo gets this treasure—weighs ten pounds if it weighs a hounce!"

The bidding opened. The box, fashioned by the fair hands of Mrs. Joe Boggs, was finally knocked down to Slim Webber, whose face assumed the expression of a stunned ox when he caught sight of the name written on the little identification ticket attached. Then Mr. Prothero, eye alight, face already damp with sweat, seized another box, swept it aloft, and implored his fellow-men to bid, bid, bid for the love of their wives, daughters, sweethearts, and for the benefit of the Pilot Creek 'ospital. The response was enthusiastic, particularly when Mr. Prothero held up a box, generously proportioned, and artistically fashioned with a gay little sprig of artificial forget-me-nots on top. Two young cowpunchers, one from the Circle K and one from the Bar Diamond, were finally left in possession of the field, Bar Diamond winning out with a bid of twenty-eight dollars, nearly a whole month's salary.

Suddenly Johnny stiffened to attention. The box with the band of silver hearts around it was up for sale. "A bee-ootiful box!" Mr. Prothero crooned ecstatically, "a



bee-ootiful box! Wot's the grandeurs that were Greece and the glories that were Rome compared to this gem—this treasure, this product of a pair of bee-ootiful and lovin' hands attached to some fair creature who will nourish the spirit as the contents of the box will nourish the body! Weighs ten pounds if it weighs a hounce!"

"Five dollars," said Johnny.

There was a ripple of excitement through the crowd. Two dollars was the conventional opening bid. The young bloods pricked up their ears. The Circle K puncher, anxious to redeem himself, challenged Johnny's bid with a two-dollar raise, and the excitement increased until a sort of madness came upon the bidders. When the bids reached thirty dollars, Mr. Prothero interrupted to announce that cheques would be accepted for any sum above that amount. There was a prolonged burst of cheering and a renewed flurry of bids. Amid wild excitement the box was finally knocked down to Johnny for the unheard-of price of fifty-seven dollars! But Linda's warm smile made him feel that the price he had paid was a small one.

The few remaining boxes were quickly disposed of, and the couples scattered into the various rooms at the back, where small tables had been set up around a long central table on which great pots of coffee steamed. Johnny, his box tucked carefully under his arm, emerged from the auditorium to find that Linda had disappeared. He paused in some perplexity. "Guess she must be out in the kitchen," he said to himself, and looked around to find a vacant table where he could wait for her.

"Oh, Mr. Bradford!" It was Miss Libby Peters. There was a dazed, incredulous look on her face, but her eyes were shining.

"Why, hello, Miss Peters," Johnny smiled.

"Mr. Bradford, you were *too* kind. I have never been so—so" Miss Libby was close to tears. She turned away

her head, and Johnny flipped back the silver heart on the top of the box and looked at the name written underneath.

"Uh—well," he stammered awkwardly, "it's—uh—"

Miss Libby slipped her arm through his. "Please don't try to explain," she said gently. "I'm really very proud."

Johnny looked down into the little, child-like face under the frame of silver hair. Then he patted Miss Libby's hand. "That makes two satisfied parties, then, Miss Libby," he said. And, suddenly, he knew he meant it.



Chapter XX

THEY FOUND A TABLE IN A QUIET CORNER, AND FOR HALF an hour Miss Libby sat enthralled, while Johnny alternately talked and ate. How it had all come about, Miss Libby had no idea, and she was wise enough not to seek too far for a solution. It was enough that a handsome young man had paid a record price for the privilege of eating supper with her. The experience was a reality of the moment -- soon it would be a memory only, but one to be cherished always. And with that assurance, Miss Libby was content.

Once or twice Linda, who was eating supper with the cowpuncher from the Bar Diamond, looked in Johnny's direction. Johnny returned her smile with a grin that extended from ear to ear. He felt no jealousy, and he was enjoying himself because Miss Libby was so obviously happy. "It's been a lot of fun, Miss Libby," he assured her, as he finished the last mouthful of a huge segment of apple pie. "Any time you want a recommend for cookin', just call on me."

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, Mr. Bradford," said Miss Libby gravely. Then, in response to an urgent signal from Mr. Prothero, she stood up reluctantly. "I play the organ for the dancing," she explained, with naïve pride. "I must go now."

"Well, thanks again for everythin'," said Johnny. "Food, company, concert. I'm havin' a swell time."

Miss Libby blushed delightedly. "The concert, I'm afraid, was a little lacking in body. We had hoped to present a little play, but unfortunately it fell through. Last year we did one, with Mr. Conway in the leading

role. It was a very great success. But Mr. Conway is away just now—something to do with missions."

"I figger Mr. Conway would put anythin' like that over all right," agreed Johnny.

"Mr. Conway is a truly magnificent thespian," said Miss Libby. "Mrs. Prothero saw Sir Henry Irving once, in the Old Country. She says that, in comparison to Mr. Conway, he is nothing—simply nothing! Now I really *must* go. Everyone is waiting." And Miss Libby swept out of the room with a new dignity born of the consciousness that for the past half-hour she had been the envy of almost every feminine heart in the room.

The dance got under way shortly before midnight. Children and babies were put to sleep on sofas and love-seats, for there would be no sitting-out of dances except in the case of cripples and octogenarians. Joe Sawyer, the fiddler from Macleod, provided the music, with Miss Libby chording on the organ. Their places were taken from time to time by the young Harper twins, who played duets on the mouth-organ and guitar. However, as the twins knew only two pieces, they were able to provide only occasional relief.

This was old man Walker's hour of greatness. As caller of the dances, he stood at the front of the room beside a window that was raised sufficiently to enable him to chew in comfort without greater exertion than that occasioned by the clock-like turn of his head towards the window every two minutes. Unlike most callers, he preserved a dignified bodily immobility, except for the periodic turning of the head. But his voice had the power and quality of a fog-horn, and carried to every corner of the room:

"Birdie hop in,
Crow hop out,
Jine all han's,
'N' circle about."



This, too, was the great hour of the Berkslund girls. The Berkslunds had come from the States—the lumbering regions of Northern Michigan—where a girl's popularity was traditionally dependent on her endurance and the swirl of her skirts as she wove her way through the intricate figures of the dance. It was whispered that the Berkslund girls descended to unfair tactics in order to win masculine approval—that they actually sewed buckshot in the hems of their calico gowns. Whatever the reason, no skirts whirled quite so triumphantly as theirs, and their popularity attested to a similarity of taste between the Michigan lumber-jack and the Western cowpuncher.

The square-dances, being communal in spirit and movement, made any kind of conversation between partners impossible. Consequently, Johnny waited until Joe Sawyer struck up a waltz before claiming Linda's hand. Booking in advance was unheard of, and Johnny reached the chair in which Linda was sitting just a few inches in the van of a swarm of would-be suppliants. With a cheerful "better luck next time, boys," he led her out onto the floor.

They whirled about the room to the music of the "Skater's Waltz." Linda was an admirable dancer, having a natural, instinctive poise, and sense of rhythm, while Johnny had learned the waltzer's art in many a dance-hall between Pecos and Great Falls. "Mad at me, Johnny?" said Linda. She smiled up at him, but there was the faintest trace of apprehension in her eyes.

"Mad as a hornet," said Johnny calmly.

"Well, the Willing Workers *do* need money, and, besides, you made Miss Libby awfully happy."

Johnny did not answer.

"And another thing," she said. "You weren't the only one that made sacrifices."

Johnny grinned down at her. "Meanin' that eatin' with young Wilkins was a sacrifice?" he demanded.

"Well, he's awfully nice, but—but—" Suddenly she

blushed. "Honestly, Johnny, you *know* I'd a lot sooner have had supper with you."

"Then why didn't you tip Wilkins off on the wrong box, instead of me?"

"He might not have taken it as well as you—and Miss Lobby deserves a good time."

"Nice of you to put it that way," said Johnny. "You ought to be a lawyer."

As they danced past the doorway leading into the lobby, Johnny saw Judith Sumner, who all evening had been busy behind scenes or in the kitchen. She was standing just outside the door, and she was beckoning to them. Her face was unnaturally strained and white. "There's Judith," Johnny said quietly to Linda. "I think she wants us."

They forced their way through the crowd of men that hung about the door. "Judith," cried Linda, "what is it?"

Judith laid her hand on Linda's shoulder. "There's been another raid on the cattle," she said. Johnny stiffened suddenly. He was aware that in the background Jess McNulty was standing, hat in hand. There was blood across his face.

"A raid?" gasped Linda. "And dad—"

"Your father's hurt, Linda," said Judith. Linda's face went suddenly white. Judith put her arm around the girl's waist. "He tried to stop them. He was shot. You'd better go to him."

Chapter XXI

IN A FEW TERSE PHRASES JESS McNULTY TOLD WHAT HAD happened. It was Matt Fraser who had given the alarm. Although presumably confined to the house with a knee injury, he had found it impossible to remain indoors on such a fine evening and had ridden off to visit a nester by the name of Granger who had settled a few weeks previously on the edge of the Fraser range. It was nearly midnight when he started for home. On the way, he had been attracted by the noise of cattle bawling, and had investigated. So much he had been able to gasp out to McNulty before lapsing into unconsciousness, but the sequel could easily be guessed. He had a rifle on his saddle, and no doubt had tried to shoot it out with the rustlers. He had been shot through the chest, but somehow had stayed in the saddle until he reached home. McNulty, realizing the seriousness of the wound, had given first aid, then ridden at a furious pace to Pilot Creek, leaving word with Granger in passing. Two cowboys whom he had met on the trail returning early from the dance were already on their way to Macleod to notify the police. "Told 'em to send Doc Simpson out right away," McNulty concluded. "He'll git there 'bout noon, I figger."

Judith Sumner spoke with decision. "I'm going for Steven Conway," she said. "He was due home yesterday. Simpson may not be able to come, and Steven knows a lot about medicine."

"It's a long ride, Judith," Johnny reminded her. "We'd better send someone else."



"No, I'll go myself," she said. And there was something in her voice that precluded argument.

Johnny and Linda rode hard and fast, leaving McNulty, whose horse was worn out, to follow as soon as he could. Dawn was breaking when they reached the ranch house. Without a word Linda slipped from the saddle and hurried inside. Johnny waited long enough to stable the horses and throw blankets over their steaming backs, then followed Linda. Granger was in the kitchen, putting wood in the stove. "Still breathin'," he said, in answer to Johnny's unspoken question. "Bad, though, mighty bad."

Matt Fraser was still unconscious. He lay stretched out on his bed, his face drained of colour, eyes closed, breathing heavily and with difficulty. According to Granger, the bullet had gone clean through Fraser's chest, coming out within a fraction of an inch of the spinal column. The lung had obviously not been penetrated, since there had been no hemorrhage, but loss of blood and shock were in themselves sufficiently serious. Fraser was desperately weak, and the flutter of his pulse was barely discernible.

There was nothing to do. McNulty had plugged the wound and bound it with crude efficiency, and Johnny saw no point in removing the bandages. What was needed was expert care, and medicines other than the brandy which was the only stimulant in the house. Linda, as white-faced as her father, looked at Johnny appealingly when he had completed his hasty examination. "Johnny, can't we do *something*?"

"Sure we can," he said. "Granger needs some breakfast. Go get it for him."

She shook her head impatiently. "Johnny, how can you think of breakfast at a time like this! I can't leave Dad—not for a second!"

He led her to the door. "There's not a thing we can do for your dad until the doctor comes," he said gently.

"I'll call you if he needs you. Now go and make yourself useful. Granger must be starvin'. And you could do with a cup of black coffee yourself."

She went reluctantly. Soon Granger was sitting in front of a huge plate of pancakes and syrup, with a pot of black coffee at his elbow. "Mighty good of you, Miss Fraser, to take time off," he said between mouthfuls. "Most wimmen would of figgered that grub don't matter at a time like this. Your pa'll be all right, though—tough as nails and pretty near all gristle. It'll take more than a hunk of lead in his innards to get rid of *him*."

Linda smiled faintly as she beat up a bowl of fresh pancake batter. "Daddy is awfully strong," she said, "I—"

A knock at the door interrupted her. She set down the bowl of batter and hurried to answer it. "Mr. Conway!"

"Hello, Linda," said Steven Conway. "I hope you don't mind an early call. I'm on my way home from Calgary and I thought that maybe you'd give me a cup of coffee. I've been in the saddle twelve hours straight."

Linda burst into tears. "Thank God—thank God!" she cried. "You've come in time!"

He caught her by the shoulder. "Linda—what's the matter?" His voice was sharp—almost strident.

Granger intervened. "Her dad's wounded—bad," he said, jerking a thumb in the direction of Fraser's bedroom. Without a word Conway strode across to the bedroom door.

"Hello, Conway," said Johnny. "Mighty nice to see you. Come in and have a look."

Conway bent over the wounded man. As he examined the wound he spoke over his shoulder. "Someone bring in my saddle-bags. I always carry medical supplies with me."

After that he spoke no more for nearly an hour. At the risk of causing renewed bleeding he removed the bandages, washed and dressed the wound and administered stimulants.

At last he straightened up and spoke to Linda. "He should be all right. But we've got to look for possible complications. One is infection, another internal bleeding. But he's strong enough to get over the shock, and I don't think he's lost enough blood to affect his chances seriously. You've sent for Simpson, of course?"

"Yes," interposed Johnny. "but he may not get here until tonight."

"Judith Sumner says you know more than Simpson," said Linda. "She went to find you. She thought you'd be at home."

"She'll have a long ride for nothing, I'm afraid. But it's as well I wasn't at home. If I had been, I couldn't have got here till noon at the earliest."

While he washed up in the kitchen he listened to the details of the raid. "Smart," he commented. "Very smart. Everyone at the dance and the police concentrated along the borders of the reserves. But they slipped up when they shot your father, Linda. Now the police will hunt them down if it takes a year."

He drank three cups of black coffee, but refused food. When he had finished he pushed back his cup and relaxed in the big chair beside the range. "I'll have to be on my way soon," he said. "But I'll have forty winks first, if you don't mind."

While Conway slept beside the fire, Linda and Johnny took turns in watching in the room where Matt Fraser lay. He was conscious at intervals now, and seemed quieter. Occasionally he asked for a drink of water, but otherwise he said nothing, although it was clear from the expression on his face that he recognized Linda and Johnny. About noon he asked for something to eat, and was able to get down a mouthful or two of chicken broth. Then he dozed off into a restless, intermittent sleep. But when Dr. Simpson arrived about the middle of the afternoon, he was breathing more easily and his pulse was perceptibly stronger.

Dr. Simpson was a slim, wiry man, with an intelligent face and quick, darting black eyes. His examination of the patient was rapid but thorough. "He'll be all right unless complications develop," he said, echoing Conway's earlier verdict. "He's lost a good deal of blood, of course, but he's got a constitution any horse would envy. Good nursing care, a little nourishment every three hours, and all the liquids he can drink—that's the programme. I'll drop in again tomorrow on my way back from the Hitchcocks. Mrs. Hitchcock has pneumonia. I'll spend the night there."

After a cup of coffee and a mouthful of food, Dr. Simpson rode on his way. Conway, too, left shortly afterwards for his cabin on the Piegan reserve. He was restless and ill at ease, and his concern over the imminence of an Indian uprising was evident. "The Piegans and Bloods are sound at the core," he said, as he prepared to take his departure, "but Indians can easily be stampeded. One false move and the fat will be in the fire."

"Seems to me," said Johnny, "that Cotton's men have been ridin' pretty close herd on the reservations."

Conway put his toe in the stirrup and swung to the saddle. His movements were slow and stiff. "I've been away too long," he said. "Much too long. There are things going on that the police should know about—and don't."

Then he added, with a note of grim foreboding in his voice. "But they will soon."

Chapter XXII

JOHNNY BRADFORD WAS SITTING IN SUPERINTENDENT Cotton's office when the police patrol which had been away in pursuit of the rustlers returned to report. "The snow beat us," grumbled Sergeant Lavery disconsolately. "We were able to follow the tracks to within ten miles of the border and then the snow came on—a regular howlin' blizzard it was, too. Jerry Potts himself would have been buffaloeed. But we went across and laid a complaint with Sheriff Hines at Shelby. 'Twas a ticklish business since we hadn't proof positive that the cattle had been taken across. But, to do Hines credit, he gave us lots of advice and two guides. We scouted every ranch along the border and south for forty miles, but never a glimpse did we have of a brand that didn't belong, or was fresh. The beasts have just evaporated, sir, just evaporated."

Superintendent Cotton was silent. But there was colour showing in his cheeks that prefaced an explosion. Johnny Bradford sat forward in his chair. "What would you think, sir, about my ridin' south," he said diffidently. "I know the country like a glove. Mebbe I could pick up a few leads."

Lavery glared at Johnny. "Your remarks, Bradford, constitute disrespect to the Force," he complained. "Are you insinuat' that we missed anythin'?"

"No need to insinuate," interposed Cotton grimly. "We *have* missed something—three hundred head of cattle. Three hundred head rustled *in wintertime!*" With a snort of disgust he got to his feet. "In all the years I've been on the Force I've never seen anything like it. We're

civilized community, our settlers are law-abiding, our jobs are well alleged to be efficient—and for nearly a year we've been losing cattle by the hundred. And now—this!"

He started again. Then he turned to Johnny. "All right, brother," he said, "ride south. I'll see that Fraser gets help to take your place."

The children aren't goin' to school these days," murmured Sergeant Lavery. "perhaps little Artie Gustafson or one of the Wiloughby youngsters could take Bradford's place." Then he caught his superior's eye and wilted into silence.

"I'll do what I can, sir," said Johnny. "If I'm not back in a week, maybe you'll send Lavery to look for me."

"In a week Lavery will probably be full of bullet holes," growled Cotton. "The news from the north is bad. But I think, Bradford, that you'll be able to look after yourself."

"I haven't done any too well since I came up here," said Johnny ruefully.

The Superintendent and Lavery shook hands with him. "Good luck, Bradford," said Lavery. "If you don't come back I'll be pleased to go lookin' for your corpse."

"You won't need to," grinned Johnny. "My ghost will be back hauntin' you by then."

The next morning he rode south. He had not told anyone of his mission—not even Linda. He had explained only that he might be away for several days on important business. And Linda had asked no questions, although she no doubt suspected that the "business" had to do with the raid. It was a fine morning, with strong sunshine, and a wind from the north whipping on his shoulders. The trail broken by Lavery's patrol on its return trip made the going comparatively easy.

Although he was going to look for clues in Montana, Johnny was convinced that the cattle rustling was locally

directed. It was possible that some of the raiders came from over the border—although there was no proof that they did—but if so, they almost certainly acted under orders of a leader thoroughly familiar with the district. How else could the raid have been timed to coincide with the dance at Pilot Creek, and with the massing of the police patrols along the borders of the reserves? But he had not the slightest idea who that leader might be. On the night of the raid almost everyone he knew was at the dance. He could think of only two exceptions—Major Scudamore and Jack McIvor. But the Major, according to his family, had been home in bed with a cold. Jack McIvor, however, had been missing from the Bar Diamond since the day before the dance. Joe Rasmussen, the ranch manager, had volunteered the information that McIvor was likely off on a spree somewhere. Occasionally, during the slack season, he disappeared for days at a time.

Johnny spent the night at a ranch house close to the border, and early next day crossed over into Montana. But instead of continuing south, he turned almost straight west towards the mountains. Lavery's patrol had scoured the open range country south from the border for forty miles, and Johnny knew that Lavery was a thorough workman. But there were small ranch holdings in the mountain valleys to the west, isolated from the plains and regarded with contempt by the cattlemen of the open ranges. It was barely possible that the stolen cattle had been driven into one of these remote valleys, to be held there until their brands were healed. If such were the case, the valley would almost certainly be close to the border. It would have been impossible to have driven the cattle far south, even hugging the mountains, without attracting attention.

Johnny rode steadily west until noon, when he stopped at a lonely ranch house standing under the shadow of a mighty overhang of rock. The owner of the ranch, a thin,

stoop-shouldered New Englander named Hoskins, who had come west with his bride many years before, and who had waged a struggle against man and nature that had left him prematurely old at fifty, welcomed the stranger to his table. Johnny let it be known that he had drifted over the border in the hope of finding work in Montana. "Country acrost the line's gettin' too civilized," he complained. "No excitement at all up there nowadays."

Hoskins nodded grimly. "If you'd a bin through what we've bin through these past twenty years you wouldn't be cravin' no excitement," he said. "Ain't that right, Ma?" He smiled affectionately at the little faded woman in the cotton cover-all who sat at the other end of the table.

"That's right, Dad," she agreed. "Times has been a lot better lately, though."

"Yessir, if we'd a had somethin' like those red-coats these past twenty years, there'd a bin a lot of people I know behind bars or swingin' from the gallus long ago."

"Things pretty well cleaned up now, I figger," hazarded Johnny, his mouth full of fried salt pork.

Hoskins' face suddenly darkened. "I ain't sayin' they is and I ain't sayin' they ain't." He would not elaborate further, but after dinner, when Johnny was saddling up, he dropped a casual word in his guest's ear.

"They's a lot of outfits south-east of here right along the mountains that kin give you work," he said. "Me, I figger like you that it's better ridin' the range longside the mountains than out on the plains, 'specially in wintertime. 'Course the outfits ain't so large. An' if I was you, I wouldn't put myself out none to git hooked up with the Larsen outfit. Though, like as not, they'd take you on quick enough."

"Larsen?" said Johnny. "Seems like I've heard the name before. Would that be Swede Larsen?"

"Mebbe some folks call Cliff Larsen Swede, though he

don't look much like a Swede," said Hoskins doubtfully. "Mind you now, I ain't got nothin' against Cliff personal. Me and him's allus got along great. It's just that---" He broke off abruptly and dropped his eyes.

"Just what?"

"Oh, nothin'." There was sudden uncertainty in Hoskins' tone, as if he felt that he had already said too much. Johnny did not immediately pursue the matter further.

"Me, I'm pretty particular," he said. "If you figger Larsen wouldn't suit, why I guess I'll steer clear of him. Your say-so goes with me after that meal your missus fixed." And he laughed boisterously.

"Larsen's straight south of here six-seven mile. First place you come to. It's sort of hard to find because it's down in a kind of canyon. But since you're ridin' on, it don't matter. Lydgate's place is next---mebbe eight mile beyond Larsen. Might make it tonight, but you'll have to hustle. Lydgate's an Englishman--remittance man. Says he's got noble blood in his veins."

"Larsen must be a pretty small rancher," said Johnny, as he prepared to mount.

"Yeah, pretty small, pretty small. But he uses a lot of men---off an' on."

Again there was the sudden hesitation, and Hoskins' eyes once more refused to meet Johnny's. "Swell weather we're havin', ain't it?" he concluded lamely. And there was finality in his voice.

Chapter XXIII

NIGHT WAS COMING ON WHEN JOHNNY, FOLLOWING THE trail that led to the Larsen ranch, swung Patsy down the steep side of a winding canyon. The ranch buildings, partially screened by a growth of straggling pines, lay in an untidy group close to a cliff face that formed a solid wall of rock stretching from one side of the canyon to the other. The ranch house stood on a slight elevation within the shelter of the taller pines. A big barn nestled at the base of the cliff, one end against the rock. A smaller barn and a cluster of sheds stood near by.

A light showed dimly through the heavily curtained windows of the house. Johnny dismounted and knocked at the door. There was the sound of movement inside, then the door opened a fraction of an inch. "Who's there?"

"Name's Johnny Bradford, from across the line. I heard you might be needin' a hand."

The door opened wider. In response to an invitation from somewhere inside, Johnny stepped forward into a soft pool of light. The man who had opened the door looked at him curiously. "Lookin' for a job, huh? Who sent you here?"

"Well, nobody, exactly," said Johnny with a little laugh. "Matter of fact, I ain't even sure what your name is. I just happened along, and I figured there wasn't no harm in askin'."

He shot a quick glance around him. A man was sitting beside a stone fire-place at the far end of the room. He had swung his chair around so that he was facing Johnny.

He was relaxed, smiling. But his right hand was inside his shirt-front.

Johnny's own hands strayed closer to the butts of the 45's that hung low on his thighs. "Yessir," he continued amiably. "Way I figger it, if I don't get a job here, I kin get me one somewheres else. No harm in askin'."

His remarks were purposely inane and they achieved their purpose. The man who had opened the door, a short, stocky individual with grizzled beard and cold blue eyes, turned away almost impatiently and went into an adjoining room. Johnny heard a pan bang, and knew what his nostrils had already suggested, that supper was cooking. The man by the fire got to his feet and lounged forward. He was tall and broad-shouldered, but he moved lightly. The curious pallor of his face was accentuated by a heavy black moustache.

"So you're from across the line," he said. "What did you say your name was?"

Johnny told him.

"Bradford? Seems like I've heard it before."

"Could be," said Johnny readily, "although I ain't what you'd call a public figger. I come up the trail clear from Pecos with the Gov'ment herd for the Blackfeet reserve. I wintered in the Judith Basin, then went acrost the line last spring."

Cliff Larsen's eyes suddenly narrowed. "Why have you come back?"

Johnny pulled out his package of Bull Durham and began to roll a cigarette. "I got my reasons," he said.

Larsen looked at him for a long moment in silence, then he laughed. "They say the Mounties keep a pretty close eye on things up there."

Johnny twirled the ends of his cigarette. "So they say," he agreed. He lit the cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke.

Suddenly Larsen seemed to lose interest. "I'm mighty

sorry, Bradford," he said, "but we've got nothing for you right now. Things are mighty slack. But at least we can put you up for the night. The bunk-house is empty, and there's a good stove in it. We can easy fix you up with some blankets."

"Thanks," said Johnny, with an assumption of gratitude. "That's mighty good of you. And like I said, if I don't get a job here, why I'll get one somewheres else. That's the way it is."

Under Larsen's direction he stabled Patsy in the small barn which stood a short distance from the big log structure that thrust its end against the wall of rock. When they returned, supper was ready. The food was excellent and abundant, and Johnny ate ravenously. Gus, the short, stocky man, was a good cook. Conversation was limited to a few casual comments on the weather, and a question or two from Larsen about ranching conditions in Canada. After supper Johnny helped Gus with the dishes, while Larsen bedded down the horses for the night. The chores completed, they sat for a few minutes in front of the fire in the living-room. "Gus and I usually play a few hands of cribbage before turning in," said Larsen. "Maybe you'd like to sit in?"

Johnny was dog-tired, but he accepted the invitation. It was just possible that some chance remark might give him the kind of lead he was seeking. But the hour that followed proved singularly unfruitful. Conversation was confined to "fifteen-two," "fifteen-four," "six for three," and similar phrases relating to the play. Johnny lost two dollars and fifty cents. When he finally made his way to the bunk-house carrying an armful of blankets, it was with the conviction that he had come to the Larsen ranch on a wild-goose chase. "Oh, well," he consoled himself, "I've got a good meal and a bed out of it. But I wish I knew where I was goin' from here. Seems like I'm buttin' my head against a stone wall."

Earlier in the evening Gus had lit a fire in the stove, and the bunk-house was snug. Johnny threw the blankets into the nearest bunk, kicked off his boots, blew out the coal-oil lamp on the table and prepared to roll in. But before doing so he looked out of the little window that faced west, toward the main group of buildings. The house was now in total darkness, and the moonlight cast its outlines in sharp relief against the background of snow. But the big log barn was no more than a blur which merged with the dark surface of the cliff base against which it stood.

Suddenly Johnny blinked in astonishment. High up on the rock face, directly above the roof of the barn, a light twinkled. It looked like a lantern, but he knew it could not be. Perhaps it was some trick of moonlight on a patch of snow, or a reflection from an irregularity in the rock formation. Then he laughed out loud. It was a star that he saw. There must be a great cleft in the rock splitting it in two, so that it was possible from a certain angle to see right through to the other side. He wondered if the cleft ran all the way from top to bottom. If it did—

He gave a low, incredulous whistle. His weariness forgotten, he sat down on the edge of the bunk and tried to think rationally—tried to banish the fantastic idea which had sprung fully formed into his mind. But it persisted, and in the end Johnny gave up the fight. "All right, all right," he said to himself, "I'm all kinds of a fool. But mebbe I'd better stick around awhile and see. Sometimes a hunch pays mighty big dividends."

Then he lay down to snatch an hour or two's sleep before Gus called him to breakfast.



Chapter XXIV

JOHNNY HOPED TO BE ABLE TO STAY AT THE RANCH FOR another twenty-four hours, but Larsen frustrated his plans. "I figure you might get a job at the Bar X, fifteen miles south-east " he said at breakfast. "Grassick is a good man to work for, and he asks no questions. If you hit the trail pronto you can make the ranch easy by sundown. Just stick close to the mountains—don't get more than a mile out—and you can't miss it."

"I was wonderin'," said Johnny diffidently. "if you could put me up for another day? My nag's kinda tuckered out."

Larsen hesitated a moment. "Sorry," he said, "but we're clean out of grub. Gus and I figure on hitting the trail to town this morning. We'll be gone two-three days. I'll tell you what, though—I'll fix you up with another horse. You can lead your own down to Grassick's. We'll be down some time next week and bring the horse back."

The concern in his voice seemed genuine. Moreover, his extraordinary offer of a saddle-horse to a total stranger completely nullified any claim which Johnny might have to further hospitality. Johnny accepted defeat gracefully. "Thanks, Larsen," he said with forced heartiness, "but I figger we'll get along if we leave right now like you say. It's white of you to offer the horse, though."

Fifteen minutes later he was on his way. It was annoying that the moment he had swung into the saddle, Patsy should have chosen to put her head between her legs

and indulge in a little playful sunfishing. Larsen had made no comment, and Johnny had ridden off with a mumbled word of farewell and a very red face. "Larsen seems like a good egg," he soliloquized as he rode along in a southeasterly direction. "I don't like his face much, but he treated me white. All the same, he didn't want me around any longer. Wonder why?"

The glib explanation that Larsen had offered to support his denial of hospitality had rung hollow. Johnny had glimpsed well-stocked shelves of food in the shed adjoining the kitchen, and a quarter of beef hanging from one of the rafters. Besides, it was inconceivable that both Gus and Larsen should go to town, leaving no one behind to look after the stock. Clearly, they had wanted to get rid of him, and in a hurry. Johnny had no intention of leaving the country until he knew why.

He had some bacon and coffee in his saddle-bags, and Larsen had given him a feed of oats for Patsy. About noon he turned due west, and was soon in the shelter of a mountain canyon where it was most unlikely that anyone should spot him. There were patches of grass showing here and there along the canyon floor. He unsaddled Patsy and let her graze while he lit a small fire and prepared a meal. He ate unhurriedly, then gave Patsy her oats and gathered more brushwood for the fire. The afternoon was mild, but there was a nip in the air and he saw no reason why he should not be completely comfortable.

The day passed slowly. At sundown Johnny fried more bacon and boiled another pot of coffee. As soon as he had eaten, he carefully extinguished the fire and resaddled Patsy. The sun was down and the stars shining when he rode out of the canyon and started back over the trail. Riding slowly, he planned to reach the ranch shortly before midnight. If Larsen and Gus were really on their way to town, he would have nothing to fear; but even if they

were at home they would almost certainly be in bed by eleven at the latest, and he would be able to carry out his investigations undisturbed.

He stopped in a grove of pines along a creek bed about half a mile from the ranch. He did not dare bring Patsy any closer, lest she betray him by whinnying. He tied her to a pine in the middle of the grove and struck out on foot across the snow-covered plain towards the canyon. He left his guns behind him. He did not anticipate any shooting, and they would only interfere with his movements.

He reached the edge of the canyon at a point directly overlooking the buildings. A light burned dimly in the ranch house, and he experienced a pang of bitter disappointment. But a moment's reflection convinced him that he should take comfort from the light. The very fact of its burning indicated that Larsen was not looking for a nocturnal prowler. It suggested, rather, that something unusual was afoot, something that might explain why Larsen had been so anxious to get rid of Johnny.

The moonlight was disconcertingly bright. As he went down the side of the canyon he kept as close as he could to the massive rock wall that blocked off the eastern end. Fortunately, there was a heavy growth of stunted bush along the base of the cliff, and he was able to keep fairly well out of sight of anyone in the house who might be looking in his direction. As he dropped lower, the pine trees provided an additional screen. Presently he stood in the shadow of the big log barn itself, completely out of sight of the house.

It was very dark in the shadow of the wall, but he was able to make out the main features of the building. High above his head there was a large opening of some sort, which appeared to be covered over with cloth. No doubt there were several such windows on the three sides away from the rock face. The one above his head should provide easy

means of access, since he could reach the lower edge with his fingers.

He crept to the corner of the barn and looked towards the house. Everything was quiet, but the light still shone dimly through the pines. And it was now well after midnight. He returned to his position beneath the window, caught the ledge above his head and drew himself up. The rough logs of the wall provided easy footholds and he had no difficulty scrambling up. The cloth across the window was badly torn in places, and it was easy to peer through into the interior of the barn. But he could see nothing. For a moment he played with the idea of striking a match before dropping down inside, but the risk was too great. Then he had a sudden inspiration. He reached up higher still, found a fingerhold in a knothole, and drew himself up over the projecting eaves on to the roof.

The roof was made of heavy boards covered with ragged tar-paper. The pitch was moderate, and Johnny was able to clamber up to the ridge-pole without difficulty. Then he crawled along until he reached the gable end that abutted on the cliff face.

There was no space intervening between the end of the barn and the wall of rock against which it stood, except at the point where the jagged crack, which Johnny had first observed the previous night, split the rock in two. Holding his breath, he eased himself over the gable end of the barn and dropped into the fissure. It was pitch dark inside, but, looking up, he could see a patch of sky far above, where the fissure broke through the top of the cliff. On either side of him were rock walls, behind him the end of the barn. But as he had suspected, the crack was much wider at its base than elsewhere; the walls stood fully five yards apart up to a height of six feet or more, then curved in abruptly like the neck of a bottle until the space between them was no more than three feet.

Johnny dropped the match that he had lit and advanced cautiously along the floor of the fissure, hands outstretched. After taking a few steps he saw pale light ahead, and went forward more confidently. The ground underfoot was smooth-packed and hard, and there were no boulders to impede his progress.

Suddenly he stepped out into moonlight.



Chapter XXV

FOR A LONG TIME JOHNNY STOOD LOOKING DOWN THE GREAT sweep of valley that ran between towering mountain peaks into some remote distance. It was a valley that could be reached from the outside world only through the big log barn that lay on the other side of the wall of rock—a valley where hundreds of head of cattle might graze for days and weeks, unseen, unsuspected. In his mind's eye he visualized the whole ingenious scheme which enabled the cattle-rustlers to drive their stolen herds across the border and dispose of them without leaving a trace. The beasts had no doubt been herded into the canyon on the other side of the rock, then driven into the big log barn and through an opening in the end which must lead into the passage created by the fissure. In daytime there would be light enough for such an undertaking. No doubt Larsen had a few animals trained to lead the stolen cattle through. The ingenuity of the scheme staggered Johnny. Only the chance light of a star had given him the key. How far the valley extended beyond the rock wall it was impossible to say—probably it ran between the mountains for many miles. No doubt there was an outlet at the other end through which the cattle could be driven when the hue and cry had died down.

Johnny returned through the fissure and climbed back to the roof of the barn. The light still showed from the living-room window of the ranch house. He slid down the roof, over the eaves and dropped quietly to the ground.



Then suddenly he crouched against the wall, body tense, every nerve alert.

From somewhere came the sound of horses' hoofs, pounding softly in the snow. A spur or bit jingled. Johnny crept forward to the corner of the barn. He could see the house through the pines, and the sides of the canyon shining in the moonlight.

Two horsemen were coming down the steep north slope towards the house. One of them was riding a big black horse. They drew rein in front of the house and dismounted. Johnny heard the sound of muffled voices as a door opened. Then Gus came out of the house and led the two horses to the small barn. Presently he returned to the house, and stillness settled again over the canyon.

Johnny's principal emotion was one of bewildered vexation. Logically enough, he had reached the conclusion that Cliff Larsen was the leader of the gang of rustlers; in his mind he had identified him as the man who had run him down the night of the spring raid, and as the man who had taken Riel north. But the rider on the black horse, who had just arrived, was not Larsen. And Johnny, his head in a whirl, prepared to investigate.

He had no difficulty in approaching the house since it was possible to keep well within the shadow of the pines that grew thickly between it and the barn. But the last few yards had to be made across open ground. Johnny moved among the pines until he reached the back of the house, where he could be observed only from one small window high up in the gable end. "Glad Larsen doesn't keep dogs," he reflected thankfully.

He crouched against the wall and worked his way towards the living-room window. In order to get beneath it he had to climb up on the porch that ran along one side. The floor-boards gave out frosty, snapping sounds as he inched his way along them, but the subdued hum of voices

coming from the living-room was unbroken. "Seems to me I'm spendin' half my time tryin' to see in other people's windows these days," he muttered to himself as he took off his cap and peered over the sill.

But this time there was no aperture anywhere that would permit him a glimpse into the room. In vain, and with growing carelessness, he sought for a crack or a knot-hole which might serve his purpose. Every inch of the window was blanketed over. But sounds came to him. The window was loose in its frame; and inside voices were rising, nor in anger but in confidence. "Ready now," he heard Larsen saying. "Won't have to change to wheels after all—a thousand thirty-thirties—ten thousand packages—"

Someone interrupted Larsen, and the voices trailed off. Johnny strained to hear more. But already he had heard enough to realize the magnitude of the plot upon which he had stumbled. Guns and ammunition were being run across the border—guns and ammunition to be used by the Indians and Metis against the white man. No doubt quantities of supplies had gone over long before; now another shipment—payment for the cattle recently stolen—was about to start!

Voices were again becoming audible. Johnny laid his ear closer to the crack. "And anyway," Larsen was saying, "you won't be needin' any more, if what I hear—"

A sheet of flame leaped across Johnny's line of vision, momentarily blinding him. Simultaneously something struck him a terrific blow on the side of the head. The sound of shattering glass mingled with the roar of a Colt's forty-five; then the door was flung open and men swarmed out onto the porch. Johnny, dazed, half-blinded, swayed to his feet. With a startled oath Larsen caught him by the shoulder. Then he hauled him across the threshold and into the room beyond.

Chapter XXVI

JOHNNY WIPED THE BLOOD FROM HIS EYES AND FORCED A grin. "Sorry, Larsen," he mumbled. "I guess you figger I was snoopin'—"

"I didn't figure anything," said Larsen coldly. "Someone else did."

Johnny blinked uncertainly and looked about him. There were two other men in the room besides Gus and Larsen. Both wore masks. One was standing beside the table in the middle of the room. The second man sat in a corner near the fire. He was leaning forward in his chair, a revolver in his hand, tense, eyes glittering through the slits in the black velvet mask. Johnny wiped more blood from his face and tried to think coherently.

"Shucks, mister," he said, "you didn't have no call to go shootin' at me. I wasn't snoopin'. Larsen told me this mornin' he couldn't put me up no longer, so I headed for Grassick's place like he told me to. I missed it somehow, so I doubled back here, aimin' to find shelter in the barn mebbe, 'count of my nag bein' played out. I saw a light so I come up to try to find out what's goin' on, seein' Cliff told me this mornin' that him and Gus were goin' to town. I figgered it was my *duty* to investigate. But no sooner do I get on the porch than 'bang,' and the window comes flyin' around my face and a bullet peels off a hunk of skin. Honest, mister, you got me all wrong."

The man in the corner slid his gun back into its holster and leaned back in his chair. There was a moment of silence, then a faint sound, that might have been a sigh of

relief, came from the lips of the man standing beside the table. Johnny looked at him curiously. He was a small man, whose elaborately trimmed buckskin jacket and fur-covered chaps could not conceal the slightness of his build. The jacket was unusual; it was richly embroidered with coloured beading in a design of intertwined snakes that Johnny had never seen before. The man's gloved hands, small and well shaped like those of a woman, moved nervously on the table in front of him. There was a strangely unreal quality about the situation that reminded Johnny of a scene from one of the melodramas that the travelling show companies used to play in the old days in Abilene and Dodge City. But some things at least were real, including Cliff Larsen's six-shooter which was digging into his ribs. "Look, mister," said Johnny, "I ain't even got a gun—"

The man in the corner stirred. "Lock him up, Larsen," he said. "We'll take him with us tomorrow." His voice was guttural, heavily accented. Johnny was sure he had never heard the accent before. But the inflection? Something, he could not be sure what, warned him that the man in the corner was no stranger.

Larsen spoke incredulously. "Lock him up?" he repeated. "But you don't know how much he's heard."

The other moved restlessly. "Lock him up. We won't take him with us—far."

Gus seemed to leap forward into the centre of the room, his hand on his gun, his little pig eyes hard and cruel in his white face. "Just give the word, boss, and we'll save you the trouble."

"No." The voice was suddenly imperative. "You would not be so foolish, surely, as to kill him here? You do not know what kind of trail he may have left behind him."

Gus slid his gun back into its holster. "I get the point," he said slowly. Then he chuckled. "I guess that makes him your responsibility, don't it?"

"It does." The voice cut like a knife. "And I always take my responsibilities seriously."

Again that inflection. Somewhere, some time, Johnny had heard it before. But the accent defeated him. German, perhaps, but not quite right somehow. There was no time to worry about the accent now, though. He grinned again at the man in the corner. "Thanks, mister," he said. "I figger I can straighten everything out once I get the chanst."

The only reply was an impatient shrug of the shoulders. Then Gus caught Johnny roughly by the arm and turned him about. "Get movin'," he commanded, and his gun prodded into Johnny's spine. Johnny obeyed. All the way across the snow-covered yard to the bunk-house he felt the gun in his back. At a sharp word of command he opened the door and stepped inside.

"Guess you won't need no blankets tonight," Gus chuckled grimly. "You'll be able to keep warm thinkin' about what's goin' to happen to you tomorry." Then he slammed the door shut. Johnny heard the cross-bar fall into place. Then the sound of heavy boots crunching over snow receded and died away.

Johnny at once kindled a fire in the heater. Not that he needed warmth—Gus had come nearer the mark than he had realized—but the lamp had been removed some time during the day and he wanted light. As soon as the fire blazed up he piled in more wood and left the lid off, thus lighting up most of the interior of the bunk-house. Then he began a systematic examination of the floor and walls, confident that he would soon find a way out. But very quickly his confidence evaporated. The bunk-house was solidly built of heavy logs. The four windows were high up, and much too narrow to admit passage of a body. The only means of exit was through the door, but the door was made of heavy pine planks and securely barred on the outside.

He stood up on the one chair in the room and examined the opening through which the stove-pipe passed. There was no chance of widening it, since it was cut right through a slab of pinewood at least two inches thick. He looked no further, but sitting down on the edge of a bunk rolled himself a cigarette and thought furiously. His head was sore where the bullet had grazed it, but at least his mind was clear.

And there was much to think about. Through a combination of good luck and good judgment he had found the key to a conspiracy which aimed far beyond the rustling of a few hundred head of cattle. With a grim smile he recalled what Superintendent Cotton had said about the inadequate arms and ammunition supplies of the Blackfoot tribes. Unless word reached the police at once, such deficiencies were about to be remedied. The one hope seemed to be that Steven Conway might get wind of the gun-running. He remembered the chance remark that Conway had dropped just before he left the Fraser ranch for the reserve: "There are things going on that the police ought to know about—but don't." Perhaps gun-running was one of them.

Well, his luck had been good—up to a point. But from the look of things, Lavery would be hitting the trail in a week's time in search of the missing Johnny Bradford. But he would never find him. Somewhere along the trail that led over the border there would be murder done, and the body would rest in some hidden place known only to the two sinister masked horsemen. It would be found by the prowling coyotes, perhaps, but never by man. "Shucks," said Johnny to himself, "I'm gettin' jittery as an old woman. How do I know they're figgerin' on bumpin' me off, anyway? I'm away ahead of the game." Then he remembered the words of the masked man who had sat in the corner—"I always take my responsibilities seriously." The chill edge in the voice had lent murderous force to the words. The intent had been unmistakable.

He got up and cast about him once more. But the second examination was no more fruitful than the first; there was no way out, short of burning the place down. In the end, he took out his heavy jack-knife and, standing on the chair, began to whittle away at the frame of one of the windows. He had little hope of enlarging the opening sufficiently to permit escape, but at least the work might prevent him from thinking too much.

For nearly an hour he worked away silently and methodically. At the end of that time he had a neat little pile of chips and a pair of raw hands to show for his labours. With a snort of disgust he closed the jack-knife and lay down on one of the bunks. He was dog-tired and his headache was much worse. Sleep might come and provide merciful release from the tormenting thoughts that crowded his brain.

After a time the fire in the stove burned low and the room was quiet. Johnny could hear the coyotes howling far away in the hills. As a rule he rather liked the sound, but tonight it was all he could do to keep from plugging his ears. With monotonous iteration the refrain from the old cowboy ballad kept running over and over through his mind:

“Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie,
Where the wild coyotes will howl o'er me,
In a narrow grave just six by three.
Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie.”

He had sung the lament many times, but never before had the words seemed of prophetic significance.

Down in the barn a horse stamped and whinnied, and another replied. After that it was quiet again, and Johnny dozed off. But dreams tormented him, forced him awake. He lay in the bunk sweating, although the fire had died down and the air was cold.

Nightmares again. Someone was coming to murder him while he slept. Footsteps crunched ever so slightly in

the snow. Silence, while the murderer listened at the door. Then a fumbling at the bar, an awkward, bungling rap, and again silence. With a violent start Johnny sat upright in the bunk. Nightmare? He stood up and in two strides was across the room. The latch of the door lifted easily in his hand, the door swung outward, and he stood looking out across the canyon floor. With curious detachment he saw that the sky was overcast and that snow was falling. There was no living thing in sight. The night was as empty of movement as it was of sound.

Chapter XXVII

FOR A MOMENT HE STOOD IN THE DOORWAY, HALF SUSPECTING treachery. Then, realizing the folly of delay, he put on his fur cap and jacket and stepped outside. He shut the door quietly behind him, observing as he did so that the bar had been slipped back far enough to clear the socket on the door-jamb. Without hesitation he walked swiftly across the floor of the canyon towards the south wall. No sound other than that of his feet crunching in the snow broke the stillness of the night. There was no light now in the windows of the ranch house, no sign of life anywhere. Even the horses in the barn were quiet.

Once out of the canyon Johnny breathed more easily. But there was no time to lose and as soon as he reached level ground he broke into a stumbling run. He did not stop until he reached the grove of pines where he had left Patsy.

The little mare was glad to see him. She had been standing beneath the tree for hours now, and was cold and hungry. She nuzzled Johnny affectionately while he quickly undid the blanket and strapped it across the back of the saddle. "I'm tellin' you, Patsy," he said, patting her soft muzzle, "you're not as happy to see me as I am to see you. Now we got to move—and move fast."

He fastened his gun-belt around him and, as always, the feel of the guns against his legs brought him comfort. "All right, let us come now," he muttered, as he heaved himself into the saddle.

He cleared Montana territory just as the day broke. "I can't believe it," he told himself incredulously. "I just

can't believe it. By rights I ought to be gettin' ready just about now to hit the trail for the last time. But here I am, my own nag between my knees, back in home territory all happy and serene and not a scratch except a bump on the head. There's somethin' screwy somewhere all right."

And now that he felt himself safe, he had time to think things over. Why had he been released? He was sure that neither Larsen nor Gus had had anything to do with the opening of the door. One of the masked riders must have stolen out in the darkness and slipped the bar. But which of them? The man who had sat in the corner and who was obviously the leader, had impressed Johnny as one completely without mercy towards those who had crossed his path. And Johnny had crossed it. But the slim man with the woman's hands had somehow or other communicated to him an odd sense of sympathetic kinship. The man with the woman's hands. Why did Johnny think of him in that way? Suddenly he gave a start of sheer astonishment. Perhaps the man with the woman's hands was not a man at all! That would explain the slenderness of the figure, even under its heavy coverings, and the carefully sustained silence.

"Shucks," said Johnny, speaking aloud for the companionship of his own voice, "I'm gettin' crazier every minute. What woman would be stringin' along with a gang of tough hombres aimin' to start a rebellion? It just don't make sense."

But then, not very much of what had happened on the preceding evening did. Try as he might, he could not escape the feeling that his intuition was right, and that it was a woman who had set him free. A risky undertaking, certainly, but no doubt she had had a room to herself, from which it would have been comparatively easy to climb unobserved through a window.

Although he would not have admitted it, least of all to



himself, he experienced an odd thrill as he pieced together the various parts of the picture. For reasons known only to herself, a woman, mysteriously dressed as a man, had run considerable risk in order to save his life. Once again he had the sensation of being a part of one of the fantastic melodramas that had aroused his good-natured derision in other days.

The snow was driving down now in long, slanting lines and the air was perceptibly colder. Patsy, her head down, plodded doggedly forward over a trail that was growing heavier minute by minute. But a short distance beyond the border, Johnny turned off the trail and struck out across open prairie towards a border police post that lay a few miles east. From the post, a message could be sent by fast courier to Macleod. In twelve hours or less a force of Mounties would be on the border, ready to seize any arms that came over the line. There was a possibility that, as a consequence of Johnny's escape, the plans of the gun-runners might be altered; they might lie low for days or even weeks. But no doubt the hour of rebellion in the north was close at hand; if the southern tribes were to rise in support, they must be well armed and ready when the word came. It was probable, therefore, that the attempt to run the guns and ammunition across would be made immediately, under cover of the storm. For either side there was no time to lose.

Chapter XXVIII

THE POLICE POST STOOD AT THE JUNCTION OF TWO CREEKS which united to run for miles across the prairie before emptying into the Milk River. Its chief function was to serve as a customs house, but in winter there was little for the garrison, consisting of a corporal and two constables, to do. As soon as Johnny had told his story, the corporal in charge immediately dispatched a constable to the next post north, from whence another rider would carry the word to Macleod. But it would be nightfall before a force could be deployed along the border for special duty.

Corporal Stanley was a young Englishman, fair-haired and blue-eyed, who assumed a nonchalance of manner effectively disguising a highly romantic disposition. "You know, Bradford," he said, as he sat sipping coffee with his unexpected guest, "Coughlin and I might leave you in charge of the post and ride out to see what we could see. All we'd need to do is alter our regular patrol routes a bit. Might be exciting if we ran across the beggars. Sheer luck, of course, but there's always a chance. In an affair like this I suppose we ought to wait for reinforcements. Pity, though, if they should slip through our fingers."

Johnny nodded. "Figger you're right. I'd like to ride along with you. Mebbe I could give you a hand." Now that his head had been tied up and his appetite satisfied, he felt fit for anything.

"Right." Corporal Stanley pushed back his cup. "We'll be on our way in ten minutes. Storm seems to be clearing a bit."



The three men were on their way in ten minutes, Johnny riding a rangy bay that the corporal had lent him, but Stanley's optimistic prediction regarding the weather was not fulfilled. If anything, the storm grew worse. But they rode steadily south until they were less than half a mile from the border. "Suppose they might cross anywhere within ten miles or more either way," said Stanley. "Bit of a wild-goose chase, eh? But might as well be doing something."

Johnny blinked through snow-filled lashes. "We'd better fix up a camp of some sort," he suggested. "Make it our headquarters. Then we can take turns patrollin' in either direction, leavin' one man in camp all the time. If we cover six miles all told, that's the best we can figger on. They're pretty sure to come over close to the mountains."

They built a shelter of brushwood in the bed of a creek where the overhang of the bank provided excellent shelter, and stored their food supplies inside. Then Corporal Stanley arranged a patrol rota. "Coughlin and I will ride out first," he explained. "I'll cover about three miles west, right up to the mountains—Coughlin, three miles east. That will make a six miles' patrol. Take us two hours at least in this weather. Then Bradford and I will go out, then Bradford and Coughlin. No earthly use, of course, but better than twiddling our thumbs."

After the two policemen had gone, Johnny busied himself making the camp habitable. He banked up the brushwood shelter with snow, built a roaring fire at the entrance, out of reach of the storm, and melted snow in the coffee-pot. By the time Stanley and Coughlin had completed their patrols, strong black coffee was boiling over the fire and a pan of bacon stood ready for cooking.

Neither policeman had anything to report. Visibility was bad, as the snow was still coming down heavily.

Fortunately, the day continued comparatively mild, and there was a curious roaring sound off in the mountains which suggested the possibility of another Chinook.

After a brief interval for food and drink, the patrols were resumed. This time Johnny rode east in place of Coughlin, while Stanley again struck off to the west. There was scarcely a chance in a thousand of either member of the patrol coming into direct contact with the gun-runners since it was possible to see only a few hundred feet, but as sleigh-tracks would continue to be visible for some time, it would be easy to follow any convoy that passed the border within the limits of the patrol.

Johnny rode an estimated three miles, going by a sense of time rather than distance, then turned around and started back. He was dead tired and sleepy—so sleepy that at first he did not realize the significance of the faint cracking sounds that came driving down the wind from somewhere to the west. Then his horse stumbled, almost throwing him, and he snapped out of his lethargy. The cracking sounds were repeated, and this time their meaning penetrated his consciousness. With a startled ejaculation he drove his spurs into the sides of the big bay, and the animal plunged forward snorting through the heavy snow.

There was more shooting—first two shots, seconds apart, then a whole fusilade. Through a sudden rift in the snow Johnny saw four sleighs, each drawn by a team of horses, grouped in the form of a square. Apparently they had been heading for a crossing a short distance up the creek when challenged by the alert Coughlin. Not knowing the strength of the force in front of them, and unwilling to submit to examination, the men in the convoy had obviously attempted to withdraw. Johnny could not understand why they had not got clean away. Later he learned that Stanley had arrived on the scene just as the sleighs were being turned around, and had opened a flanking fire from behind a hillock. Bewildered, the gun-

runners had quickly drawn their sleighs up in the form of a square, at the foot of a long slope about a hundred yards from the creek, and prepared to fight, hoping no doubt to escape under cover of the darkness which soon must fall.

Johnny dropped down into the creek bed, where he was completely out of sight of the sleighs, and rode rapidly to the camp. Constable Coughlin was crouched at the top of the bank, sheltered by some scrubby bushes, his carbine resting over the edge. He grinned happily at Johnny. "Lucky break, eh?" he said. "Walked right on top of me. When I challenged 'em they turned tail like a flock of rabbits."

Johnny remembered Cliff Larsen and Gus and the two masked men. "They're not rabbits," he said soberly. "They're just not takin' any chances. If they ever find out--" He dismounted and scrambled up the bank. "Let's give 'em a volley," he said. "And let's keep shiftin' our ground."

The sleighs were only dimly visible in the swirling snow. Johnny and Coughlin began shooting in the general direction of the dark blots at the foot of the slope. As they did so they moved up and down the bank on either side of the camp, in an effort to create the illusion of several men firing spasmodically. From the sleighs came prompt reply. A bullet kicked up the snow in Johnny's face; several more whistled past his head. He ducked back below the bank and spoke to Coughlin. "I'll leave you to hold 'em here. I'll slip around to the east. Mebbe I can get right behind 'em. Then when I start shootin' they'll figger they're surrounded and squat tight until dark. We got to hold 'em until the reinforcements get here."

He rode back along the creek bed for a short distance, then out on to the plain. The convoy had made no further attempt to withdraw. Johnny rode back and forth in a wide semicircle on the flank of the gun-runners, firing at intervals. Presently, because his horse was tiring fast,

he dismounted behind a hillock and, lying down on the deep snow, kept up an intermittent fire. But his ammunition was running low. It seemed only a matter of time, now, before the gun-runners would sense the weakness of the force opposing them. Johnny wondered if they would try to cross over. It seemed likely.

The minutes dragged past, and still there was no move on the part of the men in the sleighs. Apparently they had received a bad fright, and were now concerned only with holding out until the darkness would enable them to slip away. Johnny, lying half-buried in the snow, chuckled to himself. The gun-runners themselves would no doubt escape, but the guns and ammunition with which their sleighs were loaded would never cross the border now. The realization brought him the greatest comfort he had known in weeks.

Chapter XXIX

DARKNESS WAS COMING DOWN FAST. JOHNNY, HALF-frozen, stirred from the snow-bank and tried to detect signs of movement among the sleighs. From beneath one of them came a spat of flame, and a bullet sang past with angry whine. Johnny flopped back into the snow. He was almost out of shells now, or he would have blazed an indignant reply. Suddenly he was aware of firing to the north, from the direction of the creek. It was rapid and sustained. Johnny gave a wild whoop of exultation. The reinforcements had arrived from Macleod!

Without hesitation he sprang to his feet and remounted. There was still time before darkness closed in entirely, to trap the gun-runners. Policemen were riding across the plain towards him; they were throwing a net around the convoy. On both sides the firing intensified—then a group of horsemen detached themselves from the dark blur at the foot of the slope. The gun-runners had unhitched their horses and were using them as mounts! They were riding fast and shooting hard.

Two policemen drew abreast of Johnny. He waved to them. One of them waved back, then pitched from his saddle and fell face foremost into the snow. At the same moment Johnny's horse gave a curious, strangled cough and collapsed. The gun-runners—there must have been half a dozen of them at least, galloped past less than fifty yards away. Johnny, lying behind his dead horse, fired at the dark forms as they merged with the darker shadows of night and the storm. He did not know whether he had hit

any of them, but he doubted it. Accurate shooting under the prevailing conditions was impossible, although the gun-runners had done pretty well. Presently he got to his feet and began to trudge in the direction of the sleighs. . . .

An hour later Sergeant Lavery, sitting beside the stove at the post, summed up. "Ten gallons of bad whisky, intact; a six-gallon tin with three bullet holes in it and no liquor; half a sack of mouldy flour and one pound of tobacco. That's the plunder. That's what we get in exchange for two wounded men and four dead horses!"

No one spoke. Lavery looked about him. His blood-shot eyes rested on Johnny Bradford. "A child's trick for childer'," he said softly, caressing his big black moustaches. "A child's trick for childer'. They make sure you know, Bradford, that the guns are comin' across. Then they let you go, knowin' that you'll ride hell-for-leather to inform the law. And then they send a train of sleighs across the line right at a point where we couldn't miss them if we tried. Then went out of their *way* to find us. And then they put on a pretty display of consternation and huddled together like frightened sheep while three valiant men surrounded them. And all the time there's me and my men ridin' through the storm, comin' to effect a stirrin', last-minute rescue. And what happens?"

Lavery paused dramatically, and took another drink of coffee from the cup in front of him. "And what happens? We reach the scene of battle just as the shades of night are fallin'—and the enemy up and departs with a speed and efficiency that suggest he could have left any time he took the notion. He's happy to leave his sleighs behind, and why shouldn't he be? They're worn-out relics anyway, with nothin' of the slightest value in them. And in the meantime—"

Again Lavery paused and sighed profoundly. "In the meantime the ammunition train has crossed in peace and tranquillity at a point far away from the noise and heat of



battle. And by now the ammunition is no doubt safe and sound in a snug little cache against the day when it'll be used on us."

Laverty sighed again. "Bradford," he said, and the trace of a sardonic grin lurked under his magnificent moustaches, "you've been a sucker."

And Johnny did not have the heart to contradict him.



Chapter XXX

MEN AND HORSES ALIKE WERE WORN OUT, and they were not long to be left undisturbed. At five o'clock a courier arrived from Macleod. The Alouette was to the north. There had been shooting at Fort Macleod, three were dead and fourteen wounded. The mounted men and civilians and Mounted Police under Sergeant Crozier's command had been compelled to retreat to Prince Albert. So much for certain was known, but wild rumours were circulating everywhere. The Blackfeet were reported ready to rise, and Calgary was on the verge of panic.

Laverty heard the report in silence, then he issued a terse order. Half an hour later his force, except for the two wounded men and their attendant, was riding north on weary horses through the deep snow. The air was warm now and the wind had increased in violence. The Chinook had struck an hour or two before, and already the snow was clogging under the horses' hoofs. The men rode in silence. No one spoke, and the faint jingling of spurs and bridles was the only sound that rose above the noise of the wind.

Johnny rode with the patrol the greater part of the night. Just before dawn, after a word and a handshake with Laverty, he branched off to the north-west on the direct route to the Fraser ranch. No doubt the ranchers along the reserves had been warned, but he was uneasy. His report to Cotton could be delivered at second hand by Laverty. He rode steadily forward on a tired Patsy, and for the second day in succession saw dawn break over



the foothills. The snow had ceased falling hours ago, but the sky was still iron-grey. Already water was beginning to trickle down the coulées, and there were bare spots on the summits of the hills.

The Chinook carried his thoughts back to the dance; he was too tired to think any longer, too tired to grapple with the apparently insoluble problems which his experiences of the past few days had raised—in particular the problem concerning the identity of the masked riders—and it was pleasant to reflect idly on things that involved no effort of the mind. Pleasant, certainly, to visualize Linda in her sky-blue party dress—pleasant to remember the look in Miss Libby's eyes as she had timidly laid her hand on his arm—pleasant to remember the foolish, carefree conversation that had accompanied the supper.

Suddenly he reined Patsy in short. Something Miss Libby had said, an idle word recalled in an idle moment, had raised up a fantastic picture in his brain. So fantastic that he laughed out loud. And then, in a moment of almost terrifying clarity, he saw that the picture was made up of numerous parts hitherto disconnected, isolated, by themselves inconsequential, but which fitted without a break into a coherent whole. In that single moment of vision the fantastic became grim, inexorable reality!

His lips set in an unaccustomed straight line and his face was suddenly old. "Come on, Patsy," he muttered. "No time to lose." And he galloped through the clogging snow towards the distant ranch, fury in his heart and a very great fear.

He reached the ranch shortly before noon. Major Scudamore met him at the gate leading into the yard. The Major was girded for combat, a revolver on his hip, the elephant gun under his arm. "You've heard the news, Bradford?" he growled. "Couldn't have happened if I'd had my way. Riel and his breeds would have been swinging at the end of a rope long ago!"

"Your family here?" said Johnny, as he slid wearily from the saddle.

"Yes—we're leaving for Macleod at once. Fraser is well enough to travel in the buckboard. McNulty and I will ride escort."

"Good idea," said Johnny. "Hard to say what the Piegans and Bloods will do."

"Conway will keep the Piegans in order," said Major Scudamore confidently. "But gangs of ruffians are apt to take advantage of the confusion to cause trouble. Must get the women and sick to shelter. As soon as we've seen Fraser to Macleod I'm riding with Jack Stewart's militia." There was fire in the Major's eye; like the horse in the Book of Job, he scented battle from afar and figuratively pawed the ground.

Johnny led Patsy to the stable and slipped off the saddle. "Anyone goin' to stay behind to look after the stock?" he asked.

"Granger offered. McNulty is riding with me and Webber is off on special patrol. Linda has gone to Sundance Canyon to warn Conway. She'll ride from there straight to Macleod."

Johnny stared unbelievably at the Major. "Linda went to warn Conway—alone?"

"Dammit, man, don't look at me like that!" snarled the Major. "She insisted. Constable Donovan brought word early this morning of Duck Lake. The police are concentrating on the Bloods and Blackfeet. They know that Conway can handle the Piegans. But, of course, Cotton wanted him to know right away. And as Donovan had more ranches to cover, Linda offered to go to Conway. I wanted to go myself, but everyone seemed to think I'd be more useful around here. Things to organize and so on. Linda left two hours ago."

Johnny straightened his tired shoulders. "Left two hours ago, did she?" His bloodshot eyes roved around the



stable. A barrel-chested sorrel, a horse that he had used in the round-up, was pawing impatiently in one of the stalls. He picked up his saddle and threw it across the sorrel's back.

"But, look here, Bradford," said Major Scudamore impatiently, "there's no need to get the wind up. The Piegans are meek as lambs."

Johnny drew the cinch tight and climbed into the saddle. The sorrel plunged wildly as he felt the spurs bite into his side. Without a word of explanation to the Major, Johnny rode through the yard at a gallop, and on over the trail that wound across the hills to the distant Sundance Canyon.

The clouds had cleared, and the sun blazed down on a world of mingled white and grey. The water was pouring down the gullies now, and gathering in shallow sloughs on the plains. But Johnny paid no heed to the world around him. On he rode, driving the sorrel mercilessly. He was a humane rider, but his horse's flanks were flecked with blood when he at length drew rein on a high vantage point from which it was possible to have an unobstructed view all the way to the first ridge of the Porcupine Hills. But there was no sign of life anywhere in front of him, and Johnny's heart sank.

He looked back. Behind him, coming from the direction of Pilot Creek, was a solitary horseman. He stared intently. The horse was a grey, and the rider was not in police uniform. Perhaps it was one of Stewart's militia on patrol, or perhaps it was Judith Sumner. The horse looked like hers. But the rider was still a long way off, and there was no time to lose. Johnny touched the sorrel's flanks and rode on into the hills.

He reached the rim of the Sundance Canyon, and without hesitation started down the trail. He was blind with fatigue, careless of what lay around him, or his ear might have caught the snick of breech-bolts and warned him in

time. As it was, he had no intimation of what was coming until the Indians were all around him. When he saw the horsemen in front, blocking his path, and heard their hoarse challenge, he reached for his forty-five. But his hand was slow, and before it had settled around the butt of the gun a shot crashed out from somewhere among the pines. He reeled in the saddle, steadied himself and looked down incredulously at the blood which spurted from his forearm down over his hand. Then he lifted his good arm in token of surrender.

The Indians who gathered silently around him—slim young bucks of the Piegan tribe—did not seem to be hostile. There was no war-paint in evidence. One of the Indians, a handsome, hawk-faced stripling, helped him to bind up the wound in his forearm. "Listen, big chief," said Johnny earnestly, "you're makin' a heap of trouble for yourself. Don't you know that when the red-coats come they'll put you in jail for this?"

The only reply was a monosyllabic grunt. The Indian finished tying the rude bandage, then motioned Johnny to remount. "You come," he said briefly. There was no more hostility in his voice than in his bearing, but Johnny realized that he had no choice. He swung back into the saddle, then the Indian gave an order in his own tongue, and the band of horsemen faded away among the pines.

"Red-coats no come," he said, and fell in beside Johnny.



Chapter XXXI

THEY RODE DOWN THE CANYON ALONG THE TRAIL THAT LED past the Mission to Conway's cabin. Several times Johnny spoke to his captor, but the Indian did not reply. He carried a rifle under his arm. Johnny saw that it was a new Winchester thirty-thirty.

As they approached the bend in the canyon he heard a low, murmuring sound which grew louder as they advanced. Then they rounded the bend and he gave a start of amazement. The great natural amphitheatre below Steven Conway's cabin was swarming with Indians, all of them mounted. The Piegans, he knew, numbered altogether not more than a thousand souls; from the size of the gathering it was apparent that every able-bodied male of the tribe was present, and others besides, from the Bloods and even the Blackfeet.

The gathering was orderly; nor was there clear evidence of warlike intent. But there were a few ominous signs. Some of the men were obviously inflamed with whisky. And every man carried a rifle and many of the rifles were new.

Towards the back of the amphitheatre, on the side away from Conway's cabin, stood the small log stockade which the whisky traders had built years before. The canyon wall rose up abruptly from behind it, terminating far above in a sheer face of rock. At a sign from Johnny's captor, an Indian glided forward, caught the sorrel's bridle-rein, and led the horse through a gate into the stockade. There were guards stationed at several points around the wall.

Johnny slipped from the saddle. As he did so a slender figure darted out from the blockhouse. "Johnny! Johnny! I'm so glad you've come!"

Johnny caught Linda in his good arm, drew her close. "Hello, Linda," he smiled. "I've had quite a time catchin' up."

"I'm so sorry, Johnny," she said, "but I—I never dreamt Johnny, you're hurt."

"Just a scratch," he reassured her. "And I deserved it. Rode right into an ambush and never had a chance."

"Me, too," said Linda, the ghost of a smile flitting across her white face. "Johnny, what's it all about? Where's Steven Conway?"

Johnny shook his head. "I don't know, Linda," he said. "But I figger we'll find out before long."

"But he's *got* to come!" said Linda desperately. "Everyone's depending on him. Surely he wouldn't leave the reservation at a time like this! Johnny, you don't think that—that—"

"What, Linda?"

"That something's happened to him?"

Johnny did not answer. He and Linda were standing in front of the blockhouse door. The blockhouse was built on a slight knoll in the centre of the stockade and it was possible to see over the palisade walls and all the way across the canyon. Close to the base of the opposite wall a great slab of rock had fallen down in some past age to form an immense natural platform. An Indian had mounted the platform and was haranguing the milling tribesmen. At once the babble died away in a silence broken only by the shuffling movement of horses' hoofs in the slush underfoot. The speaker's voice reached to every corner of the amphitheatre. He was an elderly man of commanding presence, dressed in the conventional costume of the Piegan tribe. The Indians listened with obvious respect while he addressed them in impassioned accents.

"Figger that's Eagle Tail," Johnny said. "He's second only to Crowfoot, the chief of the Confederacy. Cotton says he's got a lot of influence with the young men."

Eagle Tail was speaking in the language of his people. His words carried to the stockade, but neither Linda nor Johnny understood their meaning. But they could gather the general import of what he was saying from the demeanour of those who were listening to him. It was certain that he was making a plea for peace. The men listened attentively; they gave no direct sign of agreement or dissent. But here and there was a ripple of movement; and on the outskirts of the crowd groups tended to break away from the main body. The disintegration spread rapidly. When Eagle Tail finished speaking, the assembly was already broken up into many small segments.

Johnny turned to one of the Indians on guard. "What's he sayin'?"

The guard shook his head, but his glance towards the prisoners was noticeably friendly.

"Well," Johnny said to Linda, "we're not out of the woods yet, but "

"Oh, if only Steven Conway were here!" cried Linda impatiently. "Just a word from him now and Johnny, what's the matter?"

There was a renewed ripple of movement among the throng. But this time the movement was coalescent, the broken fringes moving back to form part of the main body - the main body itself contracting, swaying forward towards the platform. Johnny caught Linda by the arm. "Look!" he said hoarsely.

One end of the rock platform sloped to form a natural ramp. A man was riding his horse up the ramp and on to the platform itself. As he reached the top, the murmur of the assemblage, curiously sibilant, broke forth in a wild cry. The big black horse which the newcomer rode

plunged restlessly, then settled into steadiness under the rider's iron grip.

Linda's voice rose in a cry of ecstasy. "It's Steven Conway! Johnny, it's Steven Conway!"

Johnny did not answer. His face had set suddenly into strange lines. Silence, even more complete than at any time before, settled over the amphitheatre. Steven Conway began to speak.

He began quietly, in the dialect of the Pieguns, so quietly that his words were barely audible to the two in the stockade. But gradually his voice began to rise, and, as it rose, movement, like a visual accompaniment to the sound, spread through the throng before him. Linda looked at Johnny, and there was something like dismay in her face. "Johnny," she said, "they don't seem to be listening to him--they "

"They're listenin', all right," said Johnny.

And then the muttering began, low at first, but increasing steadily in volume. And above it all Steven Conway's voice rang out like a great bell. Suddenly he paused; just as suddenly silence fell; then his voice rang forth again and rose to a fierce, passionate crescendo. With his last word he rose in the stirrups and a revolver flashed in the hand that swept upwards. From five hundred throats there swelled a cry, wild and shrill, that echoed and re-echoed from one side of the canyon to the other.

"The flamin' hour," muttered Johnny, so low that Linda did not hear him.

Conway remained standing in the stirrups, arm upflung. The Indians surged forward close around him, and the shouting died momentarily away. Then the crack of a rifle sounded high and clear above the noise that still echoed through the canyon.

For a long moment silence, absolute and uncanny, settled over the amphitheatre. Drawn by some instinct Johnny looked up to see a few wisps of smoke eddy away

from the top of the rock face far above his head. Then as in a dream he saw Steven Conway's arm drop to his side, saw Conway fall forward on the neck of the big black stallion and slide slowly from the saddle to lie a huddled, sprawling heap on the platform.

Johnny scrambled over the palisade and helped Linda to follow. Then they ran forward through the throng of milling horsemen. "Stay here," he commanded her brusquely, when they reached the base of the rock. He fought his way up the ramp and through the crowd of Indians who had gathered about Steven Conway. Then he dropped on his knees beside the inert figure and his good hand slipped inside Conway's coat. His fingers searched the inside pocket—found what they sought.

Conway opened his eyes. "Hello, Johnny." He coughed once, very quietly. There was blood on his lips. Johnny wiped it away with his scarf. Then Linda was beside him and her hand was on Conway's forehead.

"Steven," she cried, and there was an anguished sob in her voice. "Steven—" Then she broke off, stricken by what she saw in Conway's face.

Around them the Indians stood silent, immobile. Once more a great quiet had fallen over the amphitheatre. "Johnny, can't we send for a doctor?"

The wounded man's lips twitched into the ghost of a smile. "No need, Linda," he said, so softly that they had difficulty in catching his words.

Johnny folded his jacket and put it under Conway's head. The wounded man gave a sudden, convulsive movement. "They're lost now," he said, and his voice was unexpectedly strong and full of pain.

"No, no, Steven," said Linda quickly. "They're quiet now. They'll go back to their homes. They won't fight now."

A strange expression, half-anguished, half-sardonic, crossed Conway's face. "I know," he said.

He looked up at Johnny, entreaty in his eyes. Johnny bent down to catch the words that came from between lips suddenly stained a bright crimson. "Tell Judith that it makes no difference."

Then his face changed and his head fell back. And there was no more pain.



Chapter XXXII

OBLIVIOUS OF WHAT WAS GOING ON AROUND THEM, JOHNNY and Linda remained beside Conway. Then a slender Indian youth came forward quietly and without a word knelt down on the rock and looked into the face of the dead man. Johnny stared at the shining black braids that hung down the Indian's back, over a buckskin jacket gaily embroidered with a beaded pattern of intertwined snakes. "Running Stream," he said.

The girl lifted her head but did not answer. Her face was expressionless but her eyes reflected an anguish almost greater than the human heart could bear. Johnny shifted his gaze from the face of the girl to that of the dead man, and a strange shock ran through him. Now at last he knew why Running Stream had seemed fleetingly familiar the first time he had seen her; now at last he understood the affinity between her and Conway.

He got to his feet and looked at the tribesmen who had crowded around in close ranks. Then he addressed Eagle Tail, and there was neither command nor entreaty in his voice.

"Speak to your people," he said. "Tell them to go home."

Eagle Tail straightened his bowed shoulders. "I tell 'em," he said, and forced his way to the edge of the platform.

But the Indians did not go home at once. Instead they gathered closer around the platform, and a low wailing chant, the chant of the sorrowing for the dead, rose and faded away. Then the body of Steven Conway was laid on

an improvised litter and he rode to the platform to a low bank of earth and the Indians filed slowly past and for the last time looked on the face of their beloved white chief. Running Stream all the time knelt at the head of the dead man.

Afterwards, the Indians rode away to their homes, slowly, and in the silence that betokened great sorrow. When, towards sunset, Sergeant Lavery and a patrol of twenty men came riding into the canyon, the amphitheatre was deserted save for those who stood guard over the body.

"Glad to see you, Lavery," said Johnny. "I didn't expect anyone for hours yet. We sent a messenger only a little while ago."

"We met him on the way," said Lavery. "Major Scudamore told us you had high-tailed it out here, so I followed as soon as I could. I knew that wherever you went there'd be trouble."

He dismounted and looked at the dead man. "How'd it happen?"

Johnny told him.

Lavery's face twisted into a frown of perplexity. "Who do you think shot him?"

Johnny shook his head. "Your job, Lavery," he said. "Mebbe Larsen."

"Someone who wanted the Indians to fight," interposed Linda vehemently. "Someone who knew that Steven Conway would make them keep the peace. He died to save them!"

"Sure," said Johnny mechanically. "Sure, that's it. Someone who wanted the Indians to fight."

Lavery looked at Johnny for a long time in silence. "Sure," he said at last, "that's it."

Johnny and Linda rode to Macleod together. They did not talk much on the way, and only once did they speak of Steven Conway. "He was a great man, Johnny," said Linda, unconsciously echoing the words that Judith Sumner

had spoken to him long before. "A great man. He loved the Indians - and he died for them. It was the kind of death he would have chosen. We shouldn't mourn too much."

Johnny did not immediately reply. Under cover of darkness he took from inside his jacket the object which he had removed from Conway's breast pocket. It was a piece of black velvet, fashioned in the form of a mask. He dropped behind Linda and methodically tore the piece of velvet into strips.

"You're right, Linda," he said, as the last strip fluttered away on the night wind. "We shouldn't mourn too much."



Chapter XXXIII

ONCE MORE IT WAS MAY; AND THE GRASS ON THE SLOPES of the foothills was a vivid green under the sun that blazed down from the great bowl of the sky. The spring round-up was almost over, and the round-up crew were working the range just north of Pilot Creek. The land was quiet now. Men spoke of the Indian troubles as one speaks of a bad dream-- something that was disturbing in the immediate past, but will soon be forgotten.

One evening, just at twilight, Johnny Bradford met Judith Sumner on the high bank of Pilot Creek, a mile or two from the settlement. "Hello, Judith," he said, sliding from the saddle. "Last night of the round-up and I figgered I'd slip over and see you. I heard you were back. You gave me a general invite once. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember. And I'm glad I didn't miss you. As a matter of fact, I rode out in the hope of seeing you. Johnny, my congratulations. And I know that you'll both be very happy."

Johnny blushed from ear to ear. "Figger we will be," he said. "Mighty nice of you, Judith."

"Linda's a grand girl. You'll be good to her, won't you?"

The question was a rhetorical one. Johnny blushed again and changed the subject. "You goin' back east again, Judith?"

Judith dismounted, and she and Johnny sat together on the high bank overlooking the creek. "Why do you ask that, Johnny?"

Johnny plucked at the grass beside him. "Nothin'. I thought that--that--"



"You thought that since Steven was dead there would be nothing to hold me?"

"I guess so. Somethin' like that."

Judith stared off across the creek. "No, Johnny, I'm staying," she said simply. "I can't live anywhere else now. I learned that when I ran away. You see, Steven was a part of this country. And I loved him."

"Yes," said Johnny. "I figured that. But I never knew how much until "

"Until when, Johnny?"

He did not answer. Presently Judith spoke again, with seeming irrelevance. "The Indians are quiet now."

"They're quiet now," he agreed. "The way they ought to be."

"Johnny, you really believe that?" There was unexpected, desperate entreaty in the girl's voice.

"Sure I believe it," said Johnny. "But Steven Conway didn't."

"But he was wrong!" cried Judith. "So terribly wrong! He *wanted* them to fight—wanted them " She broke off suddenly and buried her face in her hands.

"I know," said Johnny sombrely. "The flamin' hour. He felt pretty strongly about it." He laid his hand on Judith's shoulder. "Listen, Judith, you did the right thing."

She lifted her head. "You - you *know*?"

"Sure, Judith," he said gently. "I know."

For a long time they were quiet. Then Judith spoke, in a curious, restrained monotone. "He always felt that way about the Indians, Johnny, always. Better a quick clean end than a slow, lingering death down through the years and generations. And I could never make him see that, even if they rebelled, there would be no quick, clean end—only defeat and greater misery. I could never make him see how useless it would have been, how much more suffering it would have meant. He was like Riel—he had

a vision- and a twisted brain. But I loved him -and in the end- "

"You saved him," said Johnny, "from himself. Judith, you've got more courage than all the rest of us put together."

"But I tried so hard- so hard," she went on, scarcely heeding the interruption. "He told me that Riel was coming- he used to tell me almost everything. He thought I'd never betray him. I argued with him, pleaded with him, but he wouldn't listen. So I went to you."

"You figured that if Riel could be arrested before Conway joined him the plan would collapse?"

"Yes, yes- that was it. But when Steven and Running Stream came riding down the street to take Riel and his men north it was too late. I knew that if you brought the police there would be shooting--death. I had to stop you somehow."

"Would he have risked a shootin' with Runnin' Stream along?"

"Yes, he wouldn't have spared his own blood." Then she added, with quick pride. "He told me long ago that Running Stream was his daughter. It made no difference."

"Well," said Johnny, "you did a mighty good job of stoppin' me."

"It would have been better if I hadn't. Only, Steven would never have allowed himself to be taken alive. And he would have hated to die in a back alley behind a whisky trader's store. It would have offended his dramatic sense."

"His dramatic sense," said Johnny musingly. "That's how I caught on, Judith. Somethin' Miss Libby said at the dance that night, about Conway bein' a fine actor. When I recollected what she said--just by accident--I knew who the man in the mask was. There was somethin' about his voice that he couldn't quite cover up."

"I know, the Irish lilt--whenever he got excited."

"Somethin' like that, I guess."

"After Riel went north there was nothing to do but wait. The night of the big raid I rode to Sundance Canyon to see if Steven was at home. But he wasn't, and I knew then that he was mixed up in the raids. It was like him to shoot Matt Fraser and then work for hours to save his life. He never told me about the raids - it was the only thing he kept secret. When I heard that the Metis had risen, I went off again to find him - to appeal to him for the last time. But I was afraid I was too late, so I didn't go straight down into the canyon. Instead, I rode along the rim. And when I saw what was happening -"

She rose to her feet, and stood very straight. "There was nothing else I *could* do then," she said. "And I loved him - had always loved him. And now -"

"And now?"

"I can't leave him, Johnny. He's part of this world and always will be. I was afraid, for a while, but I'm not any longer. Because, you see, I saved him from the kind of disillusionment that would have been far worse than death. Only, I wonder -"

Her shoulders drooped and there was a sudden tremor in her voice.

"You wonder what, Judith?"

"If he'd forgive me - if he knew."

Johnny got up, stood beside her. "He knew."

She stared at him, unbelieving. "What do you mean?"

"Last thing he said - 'Tell Judith it makes no difference.' That's why I came lookin' for you soon as I heard you were back. Figgered you'd like to know."

Once again there was a long silence. Then Judith turned away. "I'm going now, Johnny. No, no--don't come with me. I'll be better alone." She was smiling now, and her face was strangely serene.

Johnny watched her ride away into the gathering darkness. Then he mounted Patsy and started off along the

trail to the Fraser ranch. The stars came out and pinpricked the sky with brilliant points of light, and the coyotes began their nightly serenade far off in the hills. Johnny listened and smiled. It was good to know that there would be many more such nights as these; good to know that always, at the end of the trail, Linda would be waiting for him.

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About the Author

Willard Huntington Wright, university professor and literary critic, became the creator of the S. S. Van Dine stories, the best in their class during our time. Edward A. McCourt, Professor of English Literature and contributor to learned periodicals in Canada and the United States, in *The Flaming Hour* takes his place as an outstanding creator of mystery and adventure in this country.

Edward A. McCourt was born in Ireland in 1907, and two years later was brought by his parents to Canada. He grew up on a farm near Kitscoty, Alberta. He graduated from the University of Alberta, and played football for the Alberta Golden Bears. He still holds Western Intercollegiate records in javelin and hammer throwing. He was chosen Rhodes Scholar, played hockey for Oxford, held the British Universities record for hammer throwing. He studied under Edmund Blunden, the poet. Returning to Canada, he taught at Ridley College, Upper Canada College, Queen's University, and the University of New Brunswick, finally going to his home country in the West in 1944 as Professor of English, University of Saskatchewan.